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# More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023

*The number of countries with high or very high social hostilities rose for third year in a row*

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## About this research

This is Pew Research Center's 16th annual report on levels of restrictions on religion around the world. It scores 198 countries and territories on two separate indexes:

**The Government Restrictions Index (GRI)** measures actions by government officials at all levels that restrict religious beliefs and practices. Government restrictions include laws, policies and pronouncements that ban or limit religious beliefs or practices. A few examples are: barring a religious group from holding worship services; outlawing certain types of religious attire; and favoring or punishing religious groups through public funding.

**The Social Hostilities Index (SHI)** measures acts of religious hostility by private individuals, groups or organizations. Social hostilities include harassment (whether physical or nonphysical), mob violence, militant activity, terrorism and disparaging statements that are motivated by religion or target religious groups. A few examples are: vandalism of religious sites; harassment of individuals because of their religious clothing; and physical attacks on people involved in religious conversions or proselytizing.

To create these indexes, researchers annually comb through publicly available, widely cited sources of information, including publications by the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the United Nations, and several independent, nongovernmental organizations such as the International Crisis Group, Freedom House, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

To learn more about how Pew Research Center tracks restrictions on religion, read the [Methodology](#).

This analysis was produced by Pew Research Center as part of the [Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project](#), which analyzes religious change and its impact on societies around the world. Funding for the Global Religious Futures project comes from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation (grant 63095). This publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

## Table of contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>About Pew Research Center</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>About this research</b>  | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023</b>      | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Number of countries with high or very high social hostilities rose in 2023</b>               | <b>13</b> |
| Social hostilities related to religion  | 14        |
| Government restrictions on religion   | 17        |
| Changes in combined scores on both indexes  | 19        |
| <b>Harassment of religious groups around the world in 2023</b>                                  | <b>21</b> |
| Physical harassment of religious groups in 2023   | 22        |
| Which religious groups were harassed?   | 28        |
| <b>Restrictions on religion rose in most regions in 2023 but declined in sub-Saharan Africa</b> | <b>30</b> |
| Government restrictions on religion, by region  | 31        |
| Social hostilities involving religion, by region  | 34        |
| <b>Religious restrictions in the 25 most populous countries in 2023</b>                         | <b>38</b> |
| Government Restrictions Index (GRI)   | 38        |
| Social Hostilities Index (SHI)  | 39        |
| How GRI scores changed from 2022 to 2023  | 40        |
| How SHI scores changed from 2022 to 2023  | 40        |
| <b>Acknowledgments</b>  | <b>43</b> |
| <b>Methodology</b>  | <b>44</b> |

# More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023

*The number of countries with high or very high levels of social hostilities rose for third year in a row*

Pew Research Center’s annual study of religious freedom shows that the number of countries with *high* or *very high* levels of social hostilities involving religion rose sharply in 2023. Among the reasons are increases in the harassment of religious minorities and worldwide reverberations of Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel and Israel’s military response in Gaza.

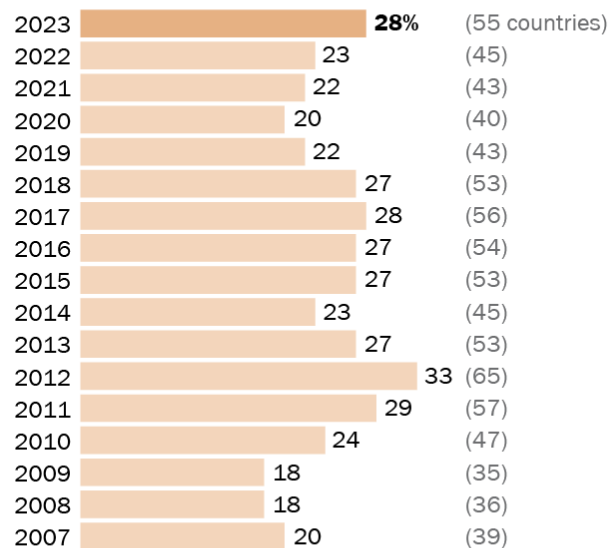
Fifty-five countries had elevated (high or very high) levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023. This is up from 45 the previous year, though still below the highest number (65) recorded since the study began in 2007. The [peak came in 2012](#) after the [Arab Spring protests erupted](#) across the Middle East and North Africa in 2010 and 2011.

## Countries with ‘high’ or ‘very high’ social hostilities involving religion rises for third year in a row

*% of 198 countries and territories studied with “high” or “very high” levels of ...*

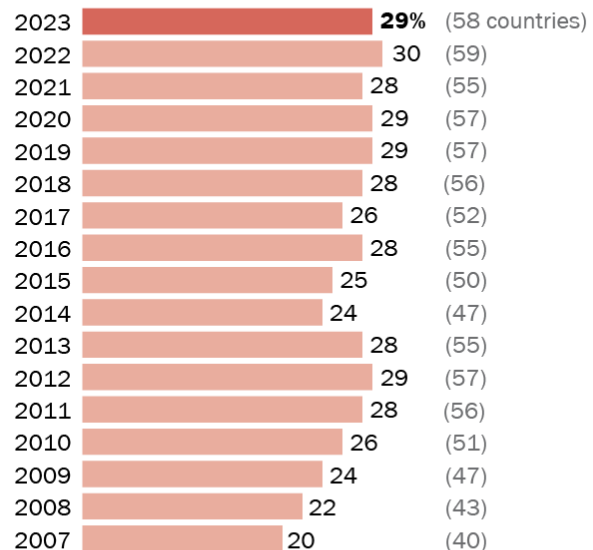
### Social hostilities involving religion

(Scores of 3.6 and higher)



### Government restrictions on religion

(Scores of 4.5 and higher)



Note: The number of countries and territories analyzed increased in 2011, from 197 to 198, with the addition of South Sudan.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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The annual study covers a total of 198 countries and territories around the world; 2023 is the most recent year for which data is available. After categorizing incidents that have been publicly reported by the U.S. State Department, the United Nations and other international organizations, we rate each country on two scales, ranging from 0 to 10 points.

The **Government Restrictions Index (GRI)** captures various ways that government officials, laws and policies can impinge on religious freedom. In 2023, 58 countries had high or very high levels of government restrictions on religion – just one fewer than the peak number, 59, recorded in 2022. Among the countries with very high GRI scores in 2023 were China, Iran, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria and Uzbekistan.

The **Social Hostilities Index (SHI)** captures various kinds of harassment and violence by private individuals and nongovernmental organizations (including terrorist groups) that are motivated by religion or that target religious communities. Among the countries with very high SHI scores in 2023 were Nigeria, India, Israel, Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

## How the index scores are classified

|           | GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS INDEX | SOCIAL HOSTILITIES INDEX |
|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very high | 6.6 to 10.0                   | 7.2 to 10.0              |
| High      | 4.5 to 6.5                    | 3.6 to 7.1               |
| Moderate  | 2.4 to 4.4                    | 1.5 to 3.5               |
| Low       | 0.0 to 2.3                    | 0.0 to 1.4               |

Note: The analysis categorizes the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities in each country by percentiles. As the benchmark, it uses the results from the baseline year of the study (the year ending in mid-2007). Scores in the top 5% on each index in mid-2007 were categorized as “very high.” The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as “high,” and the following 20% were categorized as “moderate.” The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as “low.”

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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Despite the rise in the number of countries with high or very high SHI scores, the *median* SHI score of all 198 countries and territories in the study stayed the same in 2023 – 1.6 out of 10 – as in the previous two years. Most countries continued to have SHI scores that were either low (94 countries) or moderate (49 countries). The peak median score on the SHI over the course of the study has been 2.1, which was reached in 2017.

Globally, the median score on the Government Restrictions Index has been higher than on the Social Hostilities Index every year since the study began. In 2007, the median GRI score was 1.8. In 2023, it was 3.0, the same as in the previous two years and the highest it has been during the course of the study.

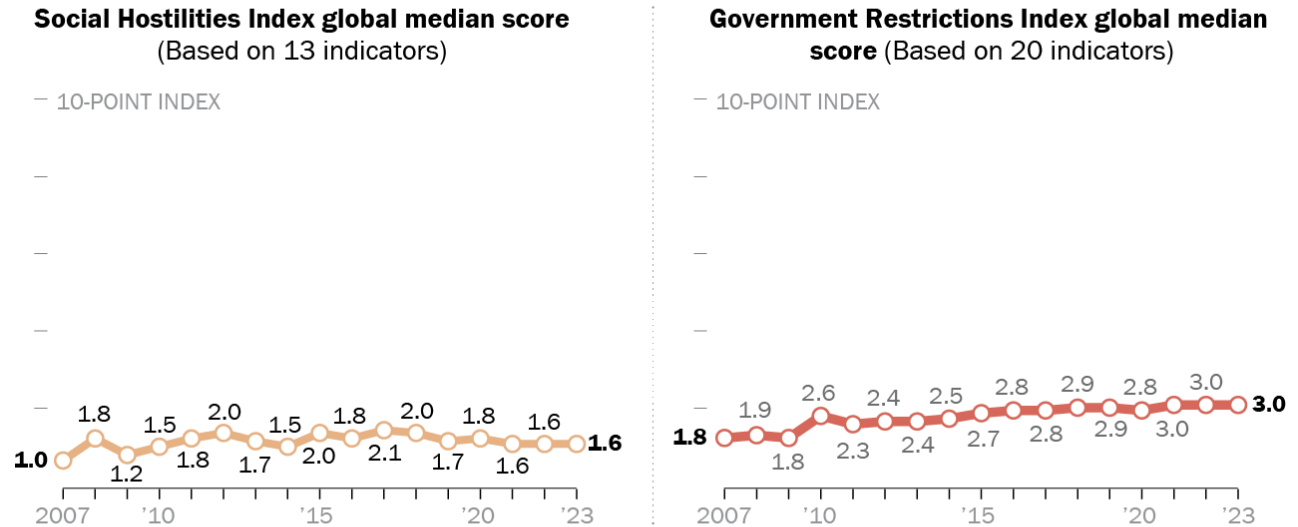
Over the years, the median GRI score has gone up fairly steadily, while the median SHI score has fluctuated. At a global level, this suggests that governments have been clamping down on religious beliefs and practices in more ways than they were in 2007, at the beginning of the study, while the number of countries with social hostilities has tended to rise and fall with events.

### **What is a median?**

In this analysis, medians are used to help readers see overall patterns in the data. A median is the middle number in a list of figures sorted in ascending or descending order.

In this report, within each geographic region (and for all 198 countries and territories we study overall), our researchers list the relevant countries from lowest to highest based on index scores. The median score is the score of the middle country on the list.

## Global median levels of social hostilities and government restrictions involving religion remained steady in 2023



Note: The number of countries and territories analyzed increased in 2011, from 197 to 198, with the addition of South Sudan.  
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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### Countries that moved into the high SHI category in 2023

Most of the 55 countries in the high and very high SHI categories in 2023 were already at those levels in the previous year, but 12 of them had moderate SHI scores in 2022. (All 12 moved into the “high” category in 2023, not “very high.”) Meanwhile, two other countries, Ethiopia and the Philippines, moved *out* of the high category and into the moderate SHI category in 2023.

In this study, a “high” SHI score for a country is between 3.6 and 7.1 (out of 10) on the index, while a “moderate” score is 1.5 to 3.5. These categories were defined based on the distribution of scores in the first year of the study, which looked at data from 2007. (For more information, refer to the chart on how index scores are classified and the [Methodology](#) section of this report.)

Of the 12 countries that moved into the high category in 2023, five were in Europe (Belgium, Norway, Russia, Spain and Sweden); three were in sub-Saharan Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone and Tanzania); two were in the Asia-Pacific region (Thailand and Turkey); one was in the Americas (Guatemala); and one was in the Middle East-North Africa region (Sudan).

In Spain, where the SHI score increased from 2.8 to 3.7, there were [increased reports of attacks against Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in 2023. In March, the verbal harassment of two Jehovah's Witnesses at an information booth in Valencia turned physical when the attackers assaulted one of the Witnesses who had tried to call the police. The resulting injury required surgery.

In another incident that raised Spain's SHI score, a man of Moroccan origin killed one person and wounded another with a machete, at two churches in the city of Algeciras. The attacker was charged with "aggravated murder with terrorist intent," although a psychiatric evaluation indicated the attacker's actions may have stemmed from psychological problems, according to the U.S. State Department.

Harassment of Muslims and Jews also contributed to Spain's SHI score. Muslim leaders in Spain reported a rise in "hate speech on social media platforms and discrimination" against Muslims in the wake of the Oct. 7 attack. At the same time, the Federation for Jewish Communities of Spain reported an increase in antisemitic incidents – including vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries and mailboxes at Jewish homes – after the Hamas attack.

In Norway, where the SHI score increased from 3.2 to 4.2 in 2023, there were cases of physical harassment of Jehovah's Witnesses as well as Jews and Muslims. In September and October, [Jehovah's Witnesses were the targets of repeated attacks](#) in Norway, including several committed by the same man over three days, according to the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Without Frontiers. (The man reportedly punched a male Jehovah's Witness, verbally harangued other members of the religious group and overturned their literature carts.)

In addition, [Jewish and Muslim groups in Norway reported an increase in hate speech](#) after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack and Israel's military response. The Jewish Community of Oslo voiced its "concern regarding increasing expressions of antisemitism in the country, and fear among the Jewish community at a level not experienced in decades," according to the U.S. State Department. In one incident, a mezuzah (a scroll with religious text that Jews attach to doorposts) was torn off the front of a Jewish home.

Meanwhile, a group called "Stop the Islamization of Norway" (also known as SIAN) held rallies in which the Quran was burned. Also, SIAN and other like-minded organizations published anti-Muslim articles online and in print. The Muslim Dialogue Network, a group funded by the Norwegian government, reported that these anti-immigration sentiments contributed to hate speech and harassment and tended to increase "after major news events, particularly those involving the Middle East," according to the State Department.

Among the countries that moved into the high SHI category, [Sweden](#) and [Russia](#) also had incidents of Quran burnings. (Refer to the section of this report on overall [changes in restrictions on religion](#) for more discussion of Sweden’s increased SHI score in 2023.)

Russia’s SHI score rose from 3.5 to 3.8 in 2023, due partly to [newly reported mob violence](#). For example, in late October a mob breached security at an airport in the largely Muslim region of Dagestan “to protest the arrival of an Israeli El Al passenger flight, with some shouting antisemitic slogans,” according to the State Department, which said the protest was in reaction to Israel’s military campaign in Gaza after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack.

Also in Russia, in 2023, there were new reports of hostilities against women who were wearing religious clothing. On the outskirts of Moscow, multiple Russian women [attacked a hijab-wearing Muslim](#) woman and her children in a playground. The attackers allegedly set their dogs on the family and assaulted them. Additionally, women were [required to conform to Islamic dress codes](#) in the North Caucasus region of the country; this also had been reported in 2022.

Tanzania’s SHI score increased from 3.1 to 4.4, partly due to [attacks on people accused of practicing witchcraft](#) (which is counted in this study as a folk religion). In October, in the country’s Kigoma region, a mob assaulted and shaved the heads of several people who were accused of being witches, after having forced them to leave their homes. According to the U.S. State Department, accusations of witchcraft continue to occur in rural parts of Tanzania where traditional healing methods are used. (For more information on incidents in Tanzania in 2023, refer to the section of this report on [the 25 most populous countries](#).)

Thailand’s index score rose from 3.5 to 4.4, partly due to increased reports of violence in a southern region of the Buddhist-majority country where the government is fighting Muslim separatists. In August 2023, in Narathiwat province, separatists set off [a bomb at a Muslim family’s house](#) where the Thai military was reportedly using the house for “humanitarian assistance” for people affected by the insurgency. The [number of killings](#) in the conflict increased in 2023, with Muslims accounting for most of the fatalities.

Meanwhile, Sudan’s score increased from 3.5 to 5.7, due in part to [damage to houses of worship and other religious sites in the war](#) between the Rapid Support Forces (a nongovernmental paramilitary group) and the Sudanese army. For more information on social hostilities in Sudan, refer to the sections of this report on [large changes on the Social Hostilities Index](#) and on [physical assaults and harassment](#).

And in Guatemala, reports of [conversion therapies for lesbian, gay and transgender people](#) that were aided or funded by churches contributed to an increase in the country's social hostilities score from 2.8 to 3.8. (Refer to the [section on restrictions by geographic region](#) to read more about these types of incidents.)

### **How many people live in countries with high or very high restrictions and hostilities?**

In total, 58 countries (out of 198 analyzed) had high or very high levels of government restrictions involving religion in 2023, while 55 had high or very high levels of social hostilities. Accounting for some overlap, 86 countries had elevated levels *either* of government restrictions *or* of social hostilities, while 27 had elevated levels *both* of social hostilities *and* of government restrictions.

The 198 countries and territories analyzed in this report contain all but a tiny fraction of the global population.<sup>1</sup> Of the *people* living in those 198 countries, about three-quarters (78%) live in places with high or very high levels of government restrictions and/or social hostilities.

At the same time, most *countries* have low or moderate levels of government restrictions and social hostilities.

This is possible because some of the countries with very high restrictions and/or hostilities are extremely populous, including China, India and Pakistan. Of course, not everyone living in countries with high levels of government restrictions or social hostilities is equally affected by them; in many cases, the brunt falls on religious minorities.

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<sup>1</sup> These 198 countries and territories contained roughly 7.85 billion people in 2020, about 99.5% of the total worldwide population. (The total world population, which includes 237 countries and territories, was roughly 7.89 billion that year.) The population figures used for this analysis are estimates for 2020 that were published in the 2024 revision of UN Population Division's [World Population Prospects](#).

## Government harassment of religious groups and interference in worship in 2023

To see other patterns in the data, we can look at subcategories of government restrictions.

In 2023, as in most recent years of the study, *government harassment of religious groups* (either verbal or physical) was one of the most common types of restrictions on religion. According to the sources we analyzed, government harassment occurred in 185 countries (93% of the 198 countries and territories in the study), about the same as in 2022 (186).

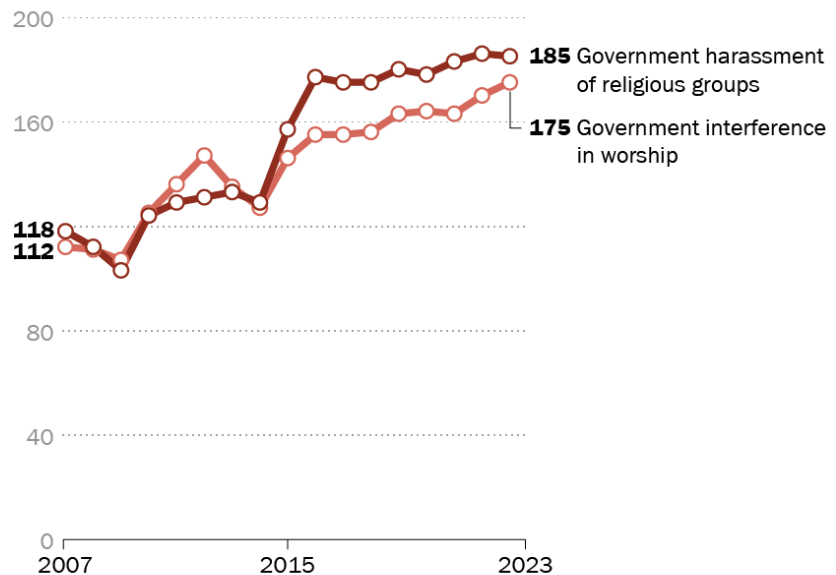
At the same time, *interference in worship* also was a very

common type of government restriction, occurring in 175 countries and territories (88%), up from 170 countries in 2022 and marking a new peak for the study. By interference in worship, we mean policies and actions that disrupt religious activities, like denying permits for houses of worship. It also includes interference against practices and rituals not explicitly linked to worship, such as burial rituals or conscientious objections to military service.

For more information on religion-related harassment by governments, refer to the section of the report on [harassment of religious groups](#).

## Since 2007, the number of countries where governments have harassed religious groups or interfered in worship has increased

Number of countries and territories where there was \_\_\_ in 2023



Note: The number of countries and territories analyzed increased in 2011, from 197 to 198, with the addition of South Sudan.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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## Number of countries with high or very high social hostilities rose in 2023

In 2023, fifty-five of the 198 countries and territories covered in a new Pew Research Center study had high or very high levels of **social hostilities involving religion**, such as harassment, assault or mob violence, by nongovernment actors. That was up from 45 in 2022.

The six countries with *very high* social hostilities involving religion in 2023 were Nigeria, India, Israel, Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Both Israel and Bangladesh moved into the very high category partly because of large-scale violence, including the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7 in southern Israel and rioting against Ahmadi Muslims on March 3-4 in northern Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, 58 countries and territories had high or very high levels of **government restrictions on religion** in 2023, about the same number as in the previous year (59). Twenty-five countries had *very high* levels of government restrictions, including China, Iran, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria and Uzbekistan.

Most countries around the world continued to have low or moderate social hostilities involving religion. Most also had low or moderate government restrictions on religion.

These findings are based on each country's scores on two indexes.

The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) combines 13 indicators of religion-related hostilities by private individuals, groups and organizations, including terrorist groups. The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) includes 20 indicators of how government officials, laws and policies restrict religion. Scores on each index range from 0 to 10.

This part of the study focuses on countries that scored high or very high on either index. It also examines year-to-year changes, including how many countries moved up or down on each

### How the index scores are classified

|           | GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS INDEX | SOCIAL HOSTILITIES INDEX |
|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very high | 6.6 to 10.0                   | 7.2 to 10.0              |
| High      | 4.5 to 6.5                    | 3.6 to 7.1               |
| Moderate  | 2.4 to 4.4                    | 1.5 to 3.5               |
| Low       | 0.0 to 2.3                    | 0.0 to 1.4               |

Note: The analysis categorizes the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities in each country by percentiles. As the benchmark, it uses the results from the baseline year of the study (the year ending in mid-2007). Scores in the top 5% on each index in mid-2007 were categorized as "very high." The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as "high," and the following 20% were categorized as "moderate." The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as "low."

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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index. It is part of a wider Pew Research Center study of restrictions on religion around the world in 2023. Read the [report overview](#) for a broader understanding of the study’s key findings.

## Social hostilities related to religion

On the SHI, a score of 7.2 to 10 is considered very high, while a score of 3.6 to 7.1 is considered high. (Refer to the chart and [Methodology](#) for more details on SHI categories.)

In 2023, six countries scored very high on the SHI, a slight decrease from seven in 2022. But 49 countries and territories scored high, up from 38 the previous year. In total, 55 scored either very high or high in 2023.

As in past years, most of the 198 countries and territories covered by the study had either low (94 countries) or moderate (49) levels of social hostilities in 2023.

### Countries with the most extensive social hostilities

Each of the six countries with the highest levels of social hostilities in 2023 – Nigeria, India, Israel, Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan – had an SHI score of at least 7.5 in 2023, placing them firmly in the very high category.

The previous year, Israel and Bangladesh had been in the “high” category (rather than “very high”). Israel’s increase in score, from 7.1 points in 2022 to 8.4 points, reflected among other events a surprise attack by Hamas militants from the Gaza Strip on a music festival, kibbutzim and military bases [in southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023](#).<sup>2</sup>

The Hamas attack added to Israel’s SHI score because it was a terrorist attack on Israeli territory committed by an organization whose

### Countries and territories with ‘very high’ social hostilities involving religion

*Scores of 7.2 or higher on the 10-point Social Hostilities Index*

| 2022         | 2023                |
|--------------|---------------------|
| Afghanistan* | <b>Bangladesh**</b> |
| Egypt*       | India               |
| India        | <b>Israel**</b>     |
| Iraq*        | Nigeria             |
| Nigeria      | Pakistan            |
| Pakistan     | Syria               |
| Syria        |                     |

\* Country had “very high” social hostilities in 2022 but not in 2023.

\*\* (or bold) Country had “very high” social hostilities in 2023 but not in 2022.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of coding terrorism attacks, we count only attacks against noncombatants. Therefore, the Hamas attacks on Israel’s military bases were not coded as social hostilities against religion. For more, refer to the report’s [Methodology](#).

[charter cites religious principles and objectives](#). Terrorism motivated by religion or targeting a religious group is counted in this study as a social hostility involving religion in the country where it occurs. Refer to the [Methodology](#) for more details.

Bangladesh's increase (from 6.1 to 7.8 points on the SHI) also reflects, in part, deaths in 2023 from mob violence. On March 3-4, [hundreds of people attacked the Ahmadi Muslim community](#) at an annual gathering in the village of Ahmednagar, in the northern Panchagarh district. The attack resulted in two deaths, dozens of injuries, and the looting and destruction of many Ahmadi homes, an Ahmadi mosque, and a medical clinic, according to the U.S. State Department's 2023 annual report on International Religious Freedom. Earlier in the year, a crowd of hundreds also attacked the house of a Hindu man in the village of Kotalipara (located in the Gopalganj district) in retaliation for a Facebook posting that allegedly denigrated the Prophet Muhammad.

Three countries – Afghanistan, Egypt and Iraq – had SHI levels that *decreased* from very high in 2022 to high in 2023. Although they shifted between categories, both Afghanistan and Egypt had fairly small numerical reductions in their SHI scores, going from 7.3 to 7.0 and 7.4 to 7.1, respectively. Iraq's SHI score decreased by a full point, from 7.8 to 6.8.<sup>3</sup>

### Changes in scores on the Social Hostilities Index

In 2023, 139 countries had changes in their SHI scores of at least 0.1 point, including 88 countries with *increases* and 51 with *decreases*. Fifty-nine countries had no change in their overall SHI scores. In 2023, the number of countries with a year-to-year *decrease* on the SHI (51) is the lowest in the 16-year history of our study.

In just over half the countries analyzed (103 out of 198), the change in SHI scores was relatively small in 2023 (0.1 to 0.9 point), including 61 countries with increases and 42 with decreases.

### Changes on the SHI in 2023

*Changes on the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) from 2022 to 2023*

| POINT CHANGE         | NUMBER OF COUNTRIES | % OF COUNTRIES |     |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------|-----|
| 2.0 or more increase | 3                   | 2%             | 45% |
| 1.0 to 1.9 increase  | 24                  | 12             |     |
| 0.1 to 0.9 increase  | 61                  | 31             |     |
| No change            | 59                  | 30             | 30% |
| 0.1 to 0.9 decrease  | 42                  | 21             | 26% |
| 1.0 to 1.9 decrease  | 9                   | 5              |     |
| 2.0 or more decrease | 0                   | 0              |     |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>198</b>          | <b>100</b>     |     |

Note: Point changes are calculated by comparing SHI scores from year to year. Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the [Methodology](#) for details.

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<sup>3</sup> To capture ongoing hostilities, some SHI measures include events not just in the coding year but also in the previous two years. The decrease in Iraq's score in 2023, then, partly reflects a decline over time in social hostilities since 2020, not just a drop from 2022 to 2023. Refer to the [Methodology](#) for details on the measures that are coded over multiple years.

An additional 33 countries had modest SHI changes (1.0 to 1.9 points), including 24 increases and nine decreases.

No countries or territories had large SHI decreases in 2023, but three countries had large *increases* (2.0 points or more). One of those countries, Argentina, moved from the low category to moderate social hostilities as its SHI score rose from 0.2 in 2022 to 2.4 in 2023. Among the incidents reflected in Argentina's higher score were the discovery by police of [Nazi memorabilia and materials denying the Holocaust](#) in a law firm's "private museum" in Buenos Aires, and a bookstore in the city that sold and printed Nazi, antisemitic and Holocaust-denying texts.

The other countries that had large increases, Sudan and Sweden, moved from the moderate category to a high level of social hostilities.

Sudan's SHI score rose from 3.5 to 5.7, which was mostly due to continued conflict between the Sudanese military and the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Amnesty International reported that the [RSF targeted Coptic Christians](#), including in a May 13 attack on a church in Omdurman, where witnesses said RSF fighters shot several members of the clergy, stole money and took a gold cross. In that incident, and at other times during the year, the [RSF reportedly pressured Coptic Christians](#) to convert to Islam.

Additionally, the RSF seized religious buildings in Sudan – including mosques and Coptic churches – for use as military bases. In one example cited by the U.S. State Department, the RSF converted the Shambat Mosque in the city of Bahri (also known as Khartoum North) into a barracks and ammunition warehouse, blocking its use for worship for months.

Sweden's rounded SHI score increased from 2.6 to 4.5 in 2023, reflecting – among other incidents – anti-Muslim demonstrations that included desecrations of the Quran.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the year, there were reports of individuals or small groups of protestors "[burning the Quran, ripping pages out of the Quran, stomping on the pages of the Quran, and smearing bacon on the Quran,](#)" according to the State Department. The Quran desecrations occurred outside the parliament, the embassies of Muslim-majority countries and the Stockholm Mosque during Eid al-Adha.

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<sup>4</sup> The change in Sweden's SHI raw scores between 2022 (4.5462) and 2023 (2.5615) was actually 1.98 points, which we round to 2.0. That's why we place Sweden in the category of countries with large SHI changes. However, due to our report's rounding techniques for final SHI scores, the difference in the rounded numbers appears here as lower than 2.0 (1.9).

## Government restrictions on religion

On the Government Restrictions Index (GRI), a score of 6.6 to 10 is considered very high, while scores between 4.5 and 6.5 points are considered high. (Refer to the chart above on how the index scores are classified and the report’s [Methodology](#) for more details on GRI categories.)

In 2023, 25 countries had very high levels of government restrictions on religion, up from 24 in 2022. An additional 33 countries and territories scored high, down from 35 in 2022. In total, 58 scored either very high or high in 2023.

As in past years, most of the 198 countries and territories covered by the study had either low (71 countries) or moderate (69) government restrictions on religion.

### Countries with the most extensive government restrictions

Among the countries with very high GRI scores in 2023 were China, Iran, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Syria and Uzbekistan. Each of these six countries had a GRI score of at least 7.8, placing them firmly in the very high category.<sup>5</sup>

In 2023, four countries – Belarus, Brunei, Laos and Qatar – moved into the very high category from the high category in 2022. However, all four had GRI increases of less than 1 point.

In Laos, where Buddhism is the majority religion, the GRI score rose by 0.8 (from 5.9 to 6.7) in part due to reports that [local authorities displaced or](#)

<sup>5</sup> Uzbekistan’s raw GRI score was 7.77 but rounded to 7.8.

## Countries and territories with ‘very high’ government restrictions on religion

*Scores of 6.6 or higher on the 10-point Government Restrictions Index*

| 2022            | 2023             |
|-----------------|------------------|
| Afghanistan     | Afghanistan      |
| Algeria         | Algeria          |
| Azerbaijan      | Azerbaijan       |
| China           | <b>Belarus**</b> |
| Egypt           | <b>Brunei**</b>  |
| Indonesia       | China            |
| Iran            | Egypt            |
| Iraq            | Indonesia        |
| Israel          | Iran             |
| Malaysia        | Iraq             |
| Maldives        | Israel           |
| Mauritania      | <b>Laos**</b>    |
| Morocco         | Malaysia         |
| Myanmar         | Maldives         |
| Pakistan        | Mauritania       |
| Russia          | Morocco          |
| Saudi Arabia    | Myanmar          |
| Singapore       | Pakistan         |
| Syria           | <b>Qatar**</b>   |
| Tajikistan*     | Russia           |
| Turkey*         | Saudi Arabia     |
| Uzbekistan      | Singapore        |
| Vietnam         | Syria            |
| Western Sahara* | Uzbekistan       |
|                 | Vietnam          |

\* Country had “very high” government restrictions in 2022 but not in 2023.

\*\* (or bold) Country had “very high” government restrictions in 2023 but not in 2022.

Note: Myanmar is also called Burma.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

“More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

detained Christians who withstood pressure to renounce their faith and damaged their properties. In October, for example, authorities in the Sa Mouay district allegedly forced at least eight families from their villages and destroyed their homes after the families converted to Christianity.

Meanwhile, Qatar’s score increased from 6.1 to 6.6 partly because of government actions toward religious minorities. Members of the Baha’i community in the country reported that the government limited their economic opportunities and tried to intimidate them, causing some Baha’is to leave the country.

Three countries – Tajikistan, Turkey and Western Sahara – dropped from the very high category in 2022 into the high category in 2023. However, all had relatively small numerical decreases amounting to less than 1 point on the GRI.

### Changes in scores on the Government Restrictions Index

From 2022 to 2023, 162 countries and territories had changes in their GRI scores of at least 0.1 point, including 94 with *increases* and 68 with *decreases*. Thirty-six countries had no change in their overall scores.

However, more than three-quarters of countries – 153 out of 198 – had only small changes (0.1 to 0.9 points) on the GRI.

Nine countries had modest changes (1.0 to 1.9 points), including six with modest increases and three with modest decreases.

No country had a change of 2.0 points or more on the GRI in 2023.

### Changes on the GRI in 2023

*Changes on the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) from 2022 to 2023*

| POINT CHANGE         | NUMBER OF COUNTRIES | % OF COUNTRIES |            |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------|------------|
| 2.0 or more increase | 0                   | 0%             |            |
| 1.0 to 1.9 increase  | 6                   | 3              | <b>47%</b> |
| 0.1 to 0.9 increase  | 88                  | 44             |            |
| No change            | 36                  | 18             |            |
| 0.1 to 0.9 decrease  | 65                  | 33             | <b>35%</b> |
| 1.0 to 1.9 decrease  | 3                   | 2              |            |
| 2.0 or more decrease | 0                   | 0              |            |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>198</b>          | <b>100</b>     |            |

Note: Point changes are calculated by comparing GRI scores from year to year. Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

“More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

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## Changes in combined scores on both indexes

When the two indexes are combined by adding each country's GRI score to its SHI score, 114 countries and territories show overall increases in their *combined scores* from 2022 to 2023, including 92 with small increases (between 0.1 and 0.9 points) and 20 countries with modest increases (1.0 to 1.9 points).

Only two countries – Argentina and Sweden – had *large increases* (2.0 points or more) in their combined scores.<sup>6</sup>

In Sweden, the increase stems in part from the repeated desecrations of the Quran that took place across Stockholm in 2023. Although Sweden's Foreign Ministry condemned the burning of the Quran as Islamophobic and offensive, Swedish courts ruled that police attempts to "deny or relocate" the demonstrations were "[unlawful limitations of free speech and assembly](#)," according to the U.S. State Department's 2023 report on International Religious Freedom.

In this study, the anti-Muslim demonstrations in Sweden in 2023 are counted both as social hostilities involving religion *and* as government restrictions on religion, because Swedish authorities approved permits that mentioned the burning of religious books.

Argentina also had a large increase in its combined SHI and GRI score, in part due to

## Overall changes in global restrictions on religion in 2023

*Changes on the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) or Social Hostilities Index (SHI) from 2022 to 2023*

| POINT CHANGE         | NUMBER OF COUNTRIES | % OF COUNTRIES |     |
|----------------------|---------------------|----------------|-----|
| 2.0 or more increase | 2                   | 1%             | 57% |
| 1.0 to 1.9 increase  | 20                  | 10             |     |
| 0.1 to 0.9 increase  | 92                  | 46             |     |
| No change            | 18                  | 9              | 9%  |
| 0.1 to 0.9 decrease  | 56                  | 28             | 33% |
| 1.0 to 1.9 decrease  | 10                  | 5              |     |
| 2.0 or more decrease | 0                   | 0              |     |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>198</b>          | <b>100</b>     |     |

Note: Categories of overall change in restrictions are calculated by comparing a country's unrounded scores on the GRI and SHI from year to year. When a country's score on both indexes changed in the same direction (both increased or both decreased), the greater amount of change determined the category. For instance, if the country's GRI score increased by 0.8 points and its SHI score increased by 1.5 points, the country was put into the "1.0 to 1.9 increase" category. When a country's score increased on one index but decreased on the other, the difference between the amounts of change determined the grouping. For example, if the country's GRI score increased by 2.0 points and its SHI score decreased by 1.5 points, the country went into the "0.1 to 0.9 increase" category. When a country's score on one index stayed the same, the amount of change on the other index was used to assign the category. Figures may not add to 100% or to subtotals indicated due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

"More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023"

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<sup>6</sup> Sweden's overall change was 1.98, which is rounded to 2.0 and is categorized as a large change. For more on how categories of overall change are calculated, refer to the note in the chart titled "Overall changes in global restrictions on religion in 2023."

incidents in which Muslims were verbally or physically harassed in public. For example, [a Muslim woman was detained by airport officials for wearing a hijab](#) and was required to undress in front of female officers. The airport security office later issued a formal apology, according to the U.S. State Department.

Meanwhile, 66 countries saw *decreases* in their combined SHI and GRI scores, including 56 with small decreases (0.1 to 0.9 points) and 10 with modest decreases (1.0 to 1.9 points). No country had a large decrease (2.0 points or more) in its combined score. A total of 18 countries had no changes in their combined scores.

## Harassment of religious groups around the world in 2023

Over the years, the number of countries where religious groups have faced harassment has increased from 152 in 2007 to 192 in 2023. That’s out of 198 countries and territories around the world.

The figure for 2023 matches the previous year’s total and remains the highest number of countries in which religion-related harassment has been reported in the 16 years since this study began.

In 2023, the latest year for which we have data:

- **Governments** harassed people for their religious beliefs and practices in 185 countries, down slightly from 186 countries in 2022.
- **Private individuals, groups or organizations** harassed people due to their religion in 175 countries, up from 164 in 2022, and at a peak level since this study began in 2007.
- **Governments and/or private actors** harassed religious groups in a total of 192 countries, including 168 countries where both governments *and* social actors engaged in harassment.

These figures capture two types of harassment: **Physical harassment** includes physical force used against religious individuals or groups, including damage to property, detentions, assaults, displacements and killings. **Verbal and other nonphysical harassment** includes insults or other hate-filled, biased remarks (either oral or written) that denigrate religious individuals or groups, as well as government policies that make religious practice more difficult.

We also count incidents of harassment in which nonbelievers or religiously unaffiliated people – atheists, agnostics and people who describe their religious identity as “nothing in particular” – were harassed, if the sources of information we rely on in this study indicate they were targeted because of their beliefs or nonbelief.<sup>7</sup>

A country is counted as having had religion-related harassment if the sources report that even *a single incident* of harassment took place in that country in the year under review. As a result, **the summary statistics presented here should not be interpreted as determining which religious group faced the most persecution.**

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<sup>7</sup> Harassment of people who belong to other groups, organizations or movements, such as Humanists, Transcendentalists and Ethical Culturists, are also counted if the sources indicate they were harassed because of their beliefs or nonbelief. Since they identify with a group, they are categorized as “Other” rather than as unaffiliated.

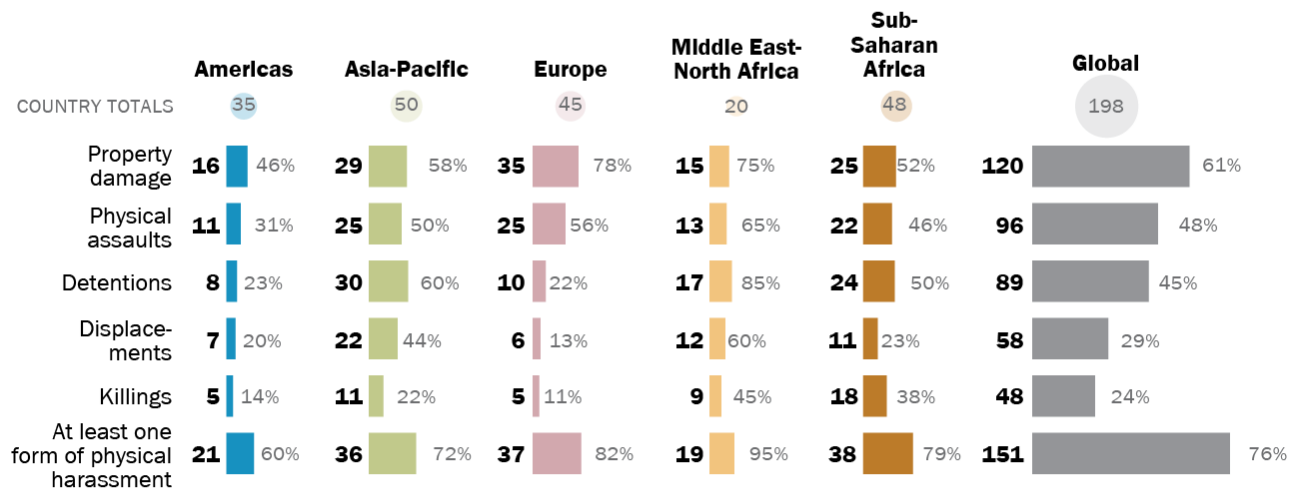
With the limited information available, we cannot claim to count every incident of religious harassment that takes place around the world in a given year, or to measure the severity of all incidents. The summary statistics presented here are best understood as *indicators* of whether various kinds of harassment are becoming more widespread or less widespread around the world over time. They are part of a wider Pew Research Center study of restrictions on religion around the world in 2023. Read the [report overview](#) for a broader understanding of the study's key findings.

## Physical harassment of religious groups in 2023

In this section we focus on the most serious harassment cases – physical harassment against religious groups, including damage to property, assaults, detentions, displacements and killings.<sup>8</sup>

### Property damage was the most common type of physical harassment for religious groups in 2023

*Number and % of countries and territories where religious groups encountered each type of physical harassment in 2023, by region*



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.  
 “More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

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According to the sources used in this study, religious groups faced *at least one type* of physical harassment in 151 countries and territories in 2023, an increase from 145 in 2022. This included

<sup>8</sup> Some incidents are counted as multiple types of physical harassment. For example, a bomb attack that causes property damage, physical injuries and deaths would count as three types of physical harassment.

physical harassment by *governments* in 110 countries in 2023, just one fewer than in 2022. It also included 115 countries where religious groups faced at least one type of physical harassment by *nongovernmental actors*, a slight uptick from 111 countries in 2022.

The most common type of physical harassment was **property damage**, with at least one incident of properties targeted in 120 countries (61% of the 198 countries and territories in the study) in 2023, the same number as in 2022. **Physical assaults** took place in 96 countries (48%), and **detentions** (including kidnappings and arrests) of people due to their religious affiliation, beliefs or practices were reported in 89 countries (45%). People were **displaced from their homes** because of their religion in 58 countries (29%), and religion-related **killings** happened in 48 countries (24%).

### Property damage

Damage to property for religious reasons – including raids, closures and vandalism, as well as cases where restitution or compensation for property seized in the past was denied or stalled – took place in 120 countries. Governments damaged property in these ways in 74 countries, while nongovernmental actors (private individuals, groups or organizations) were responsible for religion-related property damage in 91 countries in 2023.

Incidents of property damage were most widely reported in Europe (in 35 of Europe’s 45 countries, or 78%). Targeting of property also occurred in 75% of the Middle East-North Africa region’s 20 countries and territories, 58% of the 50 countries and territories in Asia and the Pacific, 52% of sub-Saharan Africa’s 48 countries, and 46% of the 35 countries in the Americas.

In Europe, [many incidents of property damage were reported in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine](#), where religious properties were attacked in warring or disputed areas. The U.S. State Department cited figures from a research consortium called the Conflict Observatory which said that Russian forces attacked hundreds of cemeteries and religious sites starting with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. In July 2023, a Russian missile damaged the largest Orthodox church in the Ukrainian city of Odessa, and in October another Russian missile hit a synagogue and rabbi’s house in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. In another October attack cited by the State Department, Russian shelling hit a cathedral in a monastery in the Ukrainian-controlled part of the disputed Donetsk region.

Elsewhere in Europe, repeated burnings of the Quran, a holy book for Muslims, were reported in [Denmark](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) and [Russia](#) in 2023.

In several European countries, religious groups complained that property restitution cases were stalled through official channels. In Albania, for example, the U.S. State Department reported that [religious groups said the government “lacked the will” to return properties](#) seized from them by the Communist government in the 20th century.

### Physical assaults

Physical assaults on people because of their religious identities, beliefs or practices happened in almost half the countries and territories studied in 2023 (96 out of 198, or 48%). Government officials or security forces took part in such assaults in 45 countries, and nongovernmental actors committed them in 77 countries, according to the sources used in the study.

Religion-related assaults occurred in 65% of countries in the Middle East-North Africa region, 56% of European countries, 50% of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 46% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and 31% of countries in the Americas.

In Sudan, which we count as part of the Middle East-North Africa region, fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces destroyed several religious sites and killed or injured worshippers. For instance, in a May aerial attack in the West Darfur region, [a strike on a mosque killed 280 people and injured more than 160](#), according to the U.S. State Department, which did not make clear which of the warring parties was behind the attack.

And in Afghanistan (included in Asia in this analysis), government officials conducted [hundreds of public floggings in 2023](#) to enforce their version of sharia. The lashings were punishments for crimes like theft and adultery. In November 2022, the ruling Taliban’s leadership had issued guidance to enforce penalties for these and other offenses under their interpretation of Islamic law.

In Ethiopia, the government and other armed groups attacked religious sites, resulting in deaths and injuries. In the Amhara region of the country, government forces targeted the Fano militia – [an ethnonationalist group](#) – in what the U.S. State Department said was a “crackdown” against the group. In May, almost all of [600 people sheltering in the monastery](#) of an Orthodox church were killed, injured or displaced after [the army launched an operation against the Fano militia](#) there.

## Detentions

Detentions (including arrests and kidnappings) related to religion occurred in 89 out of 198 countries (45% globally), including by governments in 85 countries and by private individuals or groups in 24 countries.

People were detained due to religion in 85% of the 20 countries in the Middle East-North Africa region, 60% of the 50 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 50% of the 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 23% of the 35 countries in the Americas and 22% of the 45 countries in Europe.

In Iran, which is grouped in Asia in this study, there were continued protests in 2023 after the September 2022 death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman who had been detained by the government's morality police for how she wore her religious head covering. The U.S. State Department reported that at least 10 Kurdish Sunni clerics were sentenced to "[imprisonment, exile, flogging, and revocation of clerical status](#)" because they spoke in support of the protests. A Sunni prayer leader was sentenced to 17 years in prison after speaking at funerals for two protestors who were reportedly killed by government forces.

In Saudi Arabia, where the government in recent years instituted some [legal reforms such as lifting a ban on women driving](#), women still faced "[restrictions on their religious freedom](#)," according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. In addition, activists who had called for some of the changes were still in prison or faced harassment from authorities.

Separately, [detainees from the minority Shiite religious community in Saudi Arabia](#) "[faced a disproportionate level of scrutiny](#)" and may have been given more severe legal charges than they deserved, according to the U.S. State Department. In 2023, nine individuals who were charged with crimes as minors were on death row; eight were Shiites.

Meanwhile, in the Americas, [the Nicaraguan government increasingly targeted Roman Catholic and evangelical \(Protestant\) churches](#), with the president remarking that Catholic leaders were "bishops of Satan." During the year, 27 Catholic priests and two seminarians were detained. In addition, a bishop named Rolando Alvarez who was arrested in 2022 [received a 26-year sentence without a trial](#) and had his citizenship revoked. (He was released from his sentence in 2024 and exiled to the Vatican.) The government in 2023 also [stripped the citizenship of six Catholic priests](#), along with over 200 other political prisoners who went into exile in the United States.

## Displacement

Displacements, which include people being deported or forced to flee due to religious tensions or violence, occurred in 58 countries around the world (29%) in 2023. Governments were responsible in 42 countries, and nongovernmental actors drove displacement in 28 countries. (These figures also count ongoing religion-related displacements from conflicts in previous years.)

In the Middle East-North Africa, 60% of the region's 20 countries and territories had some type of religion-related displacement. Meanwhile 44% of the 50 Asia-Pacific countries, 23% of sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries, 20% of the 35 countries in the Americas and 13% of Europe's 45 countries had at least one displacement due to religion in 2023.

In Turkey, the [government deported noncitizen Christians](#) in an attempt to curb the spread of Christianity, according to Christian advocacy groups cited by the U.S. State Department. The Turkish government's national Presidency of Migration Management said it had deported 22 U.S. citizens due to national security concerns. Nineteen of these people were linked to one evangelical church community.

In India, [more than 500 people, mostly Muslims, were forcibly evicted](#) when the government demolished homes and buildings in the state of Haryana in August 2023, following communal violence over a Hindu procession through a predominantly Muslim area. The government claimed that the 1,208 structures destroyed were linked to people arrested during riots, were houses from which "rioters threw firebombs and rocks," or were illegal structures on government land. Media reports and civic organizations said most of the demolitions and evictions targeted Muslims, including a Rohingya refugee camp. The state's high court eventually ordered the demolitions to cease.

In addition, the northeastern Indian state of [Manipur experienced large-scale ethnic violence in 2023](#) between the majority ethnic Meitei tribe, which is mostly Hindu, and the minority ethnic Kuki tribe, which is mostly Christian. The conflict stemmed from a court decision to recognize the Meitei as a "Scheduled Tribe," giving them preferential access to land and government jobs. More than 250 churches were torched, over 200 people were killed and [more than 60,000 people were displaced](#) during the conflict. Media reports said both Hindu temples and Christian churches were attacked, though "more churches than Hindu temples were destroyed," according to the U.S. State Department. In addition, a group of Meitei attacked members of Bnei Menashe, a small Jewish group composed of ethnic Kukis, "killing one community member, destroying two of their synagogues, and displacing more than 1,000 members of the community," the State Department said.

In Myanmar (also known as Burma), [large-scale, ongoing displacements of multiple groups continued](#) in 2023. For example, 147,000 Rohingya Muslims were held in two dozen displacement camps, according to United Nations figures cited by the State Department. And Karenni Christians, a minority ethnic group, were the vast majority of over 280,000 people displaced between May 2021 and December 2023 due to conflict in the country, according to a civil society network of the Karenni that was cited by the State Department.

## Killings

Religion-related killings took place in almost a quarter of countries (48 out of 198, or 24%), with governments carrying them out in 26 countries and nongovernmental actors behind them in 39 countries.

Killings occurred in 45% of the Middle East-North Africa region's 20 countries, 38% of the 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 22% of the 50 Asia-Pacific countries, 14% of the 35 countries in the Americas and 11% of the 45 countries in Europe.

In Kenya, [authorities exhumed over 400 bodies](#) following reports that members of a group called the Good News International Ministries, run by a pastor named Paul MacKenzie, had starved themselves to death after the pastor said that doing so would help them attain salvation. Kenyan authorities said some recovered bodies showed signs not only of starvation but also of “asphyxiation or blunt trauma.”

In Nigeria, there were numerous accounts of religion-related killings by nonstate actors throughout the year. In September, in Kaduna State, gunmen [killed seven Muslims during Friday prayers](#), and in October bandits [killed an imam and two worshippers](#) at a mosque. Also, on Dec. 24, unidentified gunmen attacked more than a dozen villages in Plateau State, killing more than 150 people – mostly Christians – and displacing thousands, the U.S. State Department said. Authorities and people from the communities said the attacks were linked to conflicts over land and resources between farmers (most of whom were Christian) and herders (most of whom were Muslims). Christian leaders said the December attacks were aimed at pushing Christian farmers off their land, while the chief imam in the Plateau State capital said they were retribution for previous killings of herders and the theft of their animals.

Meanwhile, in China, the State Department reported that [188 Falun Gong practitioners died during the year](#) “as a result of persecution,” according to an organization that represents the group. Twenty members of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) also died during the year due to

persecution, the State Department said. Many of these deaths were attributed to torture in prison. The government characterizes both Falun Gong and the CAG as “cults.”

## Which religious groups were harassed?

In 2023, Christians and Muslims, [the two largest religious groups](#) in the world, faced physical harassment as well as verbal and other nonphysical harassment in more countries than other groups.

Christians were harassed by government officials or nongovernmental actors in 165 countries in 2023, slightly down from 166 in 2022. Muslims were harassed in 143 countries, down from 148 in 2022.

## Religious groups faced government or social harassment in 192 countries and territories in 2023

*Number of countries and territories where religious groups were harassed by governments or social groups, by year*

|                          | 2007       | '14        | '15        | '16        | '17        | '18        | '19        | '20        | '21        | '22        | '23        |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Christians               | 107        | 108        | 128        | 144        | 143        | 145        | 153        | 155        | 160        | 166        | 165        |
| Muslims                  | 96         | 100        | 125        | 142        | 140        | 139        | 147        | 145        | 141        | 148        | 143        |
| Jews                     | 51         | 81         | 74         | 87         | 87         | 88         | 89         | 94         | 91         | 90         | 98         |
| Other religions*         | 33         | 43         | 50         | 57         | 50         | 56         | 68         | 62         | 64         | 68         | 64         |
| Folk religions**         | 24         | 21         | 32         | 41         | 38         | 37         | 32         | 33         | 40         | 49         | 50         |
| Hindus                   | 21         | 14         | 18         | 23         | 23         | 19         | 21         | 21         | 24         | 26         | 32         |
| Buddhists                | 10         | 10         | 7          | 17         | 19         | 24         | 25         | 21         | 28         | 25         | 22         |
| Religiously unaffiliated | –          | 4          | 14         | 14         | 23         | 18         | 22         | 27         | 27         | 32         | 31         |
| <b>Any of above</b>      | <b>152</b> | <b>160</b> | <b>169</b> | <b>187</b> | <b>187</b> | <b>185</b> | <b>190</b> | <b>189</b> | <b>190</b> | <b>192</b> | <b>192</b> |

\* Includes Sikhs, members of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, members of newer faiths such as Baha'i, and other religious groups.

\*\* Includes, for example, followers of African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian Aboriginal religions.

Note: This measure looks at the number of countries in which groups were harassed, either by the government or by individuals/social groups. It does not assess the severity of the harassment. Numbers do not add to totals shown because multiple religious groups can be harassed in a country.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

“More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

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Meanwhile, Jews – who make up less than 1% of the world’s population – were harassed in 98 countries, up from 90 in 2022. The increase was due in part to antisemitic statements from a variety of sources (including social media) after the attacks in Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, by the militant group Hamas and Israel’s ensuing military campaign in Gaza. This study counts hostile statements toward Jews (as opposed to criticism of Israel) as religion-related harassment. (Refer to the [report overview](#) for more information on these incidents.)

Harassment is counted as having occurred in a country if one or more incidents were reported by the sources used in this study. While the resulting data indicates whether any harassment by governments and private actors took place, it does *not* show which religious groups faced the most intense or severe harassment or which were the most persecuted.

Most religious groups – except Jews, Hindus and adherents of folk religions – faced physical harassment as well as verbal and other nonphysical harassment in *fewer* countries in 2023 than in 2022. Adherents of folk religions were harassed in 50 countries, up from 49. And Hindus were harassed in 32 countries, up from 26. In Bulgaria, for example, [a festival organized by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness was canceled](#) by local authorities after a political party said it would disrupt the event and, on social media, called the group a “highly fanaticized sect” that opposes Christian values. According to the U.S. State Department, a Bulgarian Orthodox Church leader had said the event would promote “a destructive teaching [that is a] threat to society jeopardizing the social, psychological, and spiritual health of those who take part in it.”

With the exception of Jews, all religious groups analyzed in the study also faced harassment in more countries by governments than by private individuals or social groups. In 2023, Jews faced government harassment in 69 countries and faced harassment by private individuals, groups or organizations in 92 countries.

## Restrictions on religion rose in most regions in 2023 but declined in sub-Saharan Africa

In 2023, sub-Saharan Africa was the only major region in the world where median levels of both government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion decreased.

In three other large regions – Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and the Middle East and North Africa – median levels of government restrictions and social hostilities *rose* in 2023.

In the Americas, the other major region covered by the study, the median score for government restrictions held steady while social hostilities ticked slightly upward.

Worldwide, the median scores of all 198 countries and territories across the five regions remained stable for the third year in a row at 3.0 out of 10 on the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and 1.6 out of 10 on the Social Hostilities Index (SHI).

The GRI consists of 20 indicators of how government officials, laws and policies restrict religion. The SHI consists of 13 indicators of religious hostilities by private individuals, groups and organizations, including terrorist groups.

The rest of this section describes how each of the study's large regions fared on both indexes. It is part of a wider Pew Research Center study of restrictions on religion around the world in 2023. Read the [report overview](#) for a broader understanding of the study's key findings.

### What is a median?

In this analysis, medians are used to help readers see overall patterns in the data. A median is the middle number in a list of figures sorted in ascending or descending order.

In this report, within each geographic region (and for all 198 countries and territories we study overall), our researchers list the relevant countries from lowest to highest based on index scores. The median score is the score of the middle country on the list.

For a region like sub-Saharan Africa, which has an even number of countries (48), we take the average of the two middle countries on the list. For sub-Saharan Africa, those are the countries whose index scores rank 24th and 25th in the region.

## Government restrictions on religion, by region

In 2023, the median GRI scores in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East-North Africa region were as high as, or higher than, they have been since the study began in 2007.

**In the Middle East and North Africa, the median GRI score rose from 6.1 in 2022 to 6.2 in 2023**, tying with the region’s previous peak scores in 2012 and 2018. As in all previous years of the study, the Middle East and North Africa had the highest median GRI score of any region in the world.

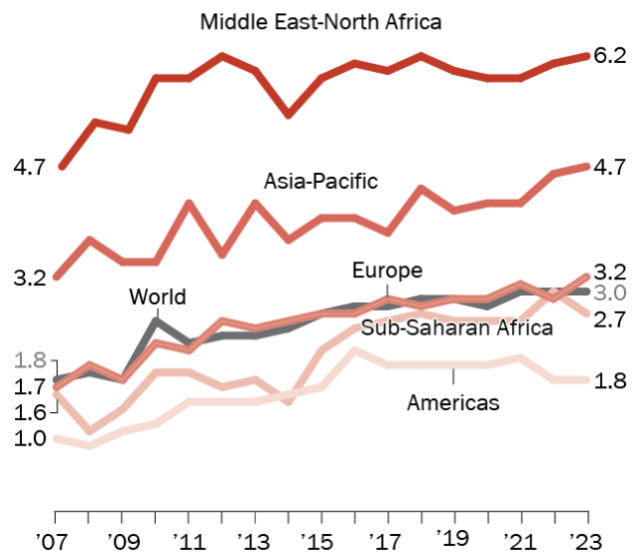
Several factors contributed to the region’s high scores. All 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa had at least one case of government harassment of religious groups (verbal and/or physical) reported in 2023 by the sources used in this study. For more details, refer to the [Methodology](#) and the report’s discussion of [government harassment](#).

Half of the countries in the Middle East-North Africa region also had restrictions related to religious dress, an increase from eight countries with such cases in 2022 to 10 in 2023. In Jordan, for example, [Jewish travelers reported facing hurdles at border crossings](#) when they dressed in ways that revealed their religion. In April, one traveler said he was not allowed to cross the border because he did not agree to hide or cut his side curls (facial hair typically worn by ultra-Orthodox Jewish men). Jordanian authorities reportedly told other travelers it was not safe to “display characteristics that identified them as Jewish” such as a kippah, a traditional skullcap for men, according to the State Department.

Meanwhile, Morocco formally has maintained a [ban on the import, production and sale of burqas](#) – Islamic face coverings for women – since 2017. The government deemed the ban necessary for security reasons so officials could identify wearers. Additionally, burqas were forbidden for police officers, women in the Moroccan army and television news presenters, though private individuals

### In 2023, median levels of government restrictions on religion went up in Asia-Pacific, Europe, Middle East-North Africa

*Median scores on the Government Restrictions Index (GRI)*



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

“More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

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were still able to wear them, according to the U.S. State Department’s annual report on international religious freedom.

**The Asia-Pacific region’s median GRI score rose from 4.6 in 2022 to 4.7 in 2023, the highest it has been since the study began in 2007.** This region contains 50 countries and territories, including places with some of the highest GRI scores in the world, such as China, Iran, Afghanistan and Indonesia.

In 2023, nine countries in Asia and the Pacific sought to eliminate the presence of a religious group, according to the sources used in this study. In Vietnam, [authorities tried to force followers of Duong Van Minh](#) (who are mainly from the ethnic Hmong community) to renounce their faith through repeated intimidation and physical harassment. Authorities broke into followers’ homes and destroyed their altars after the 2021 death and funeral of Duong Van Minh. In 2023, Vietnam’s government claimed to have eliminated [“the Duong Van Minh evil-way religion’s influence”](#) in several provinces.

Meanwhile, the military in nearby Myanmar (also called Burma) [continued to target Rohingya Muslims](#) in what several international organizations and foreign governments, including the [U.S. State Department](#), previously described as a campaign of genocide and crimes against humanity.

In addition, the Asia-Pacific region had an uptick in the number of countries and territories (from 44 in 2022 to 46 in 2023) where government harassment of religious groups was reported. There also was a small rise in the number of Asia-Pacific countries whose governments used violence against religious minorities (from 26 to 28).

**Europe’s median score on the GRI rose from 2.9 in 2022 to 3.2 in 2023, its highest median GRI score since the study began in 2007.** The increase resulted in part from growth in the number of European countries whose governments reportedly failed to protect religious groups or provide redress for religious discrimination (up from 16 countries in 2022 to 24 in 2023).

For example, in Norway, [Jewish community leaders expressed frustration](#) that police did not respond adequately to cases of harassment and were reluctant to bring charges under antisemitism or hate crime statutes, which can increase sentences. And in Germany, where Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced hostility over their proselytizing activities, authorities allegedly did not take hate crimes against the group seriously. [Jehovah’s Witnesses said police did not show interest in investigating complaints they filed.](#)

More than half of the countries in the region (25 out of 45) also had incidents of physical harassment by governments toward religious groups. This was up from 22 countries in 2022. (Refer to the [report's discussion of harassment of religious groups](#) for more examples.)

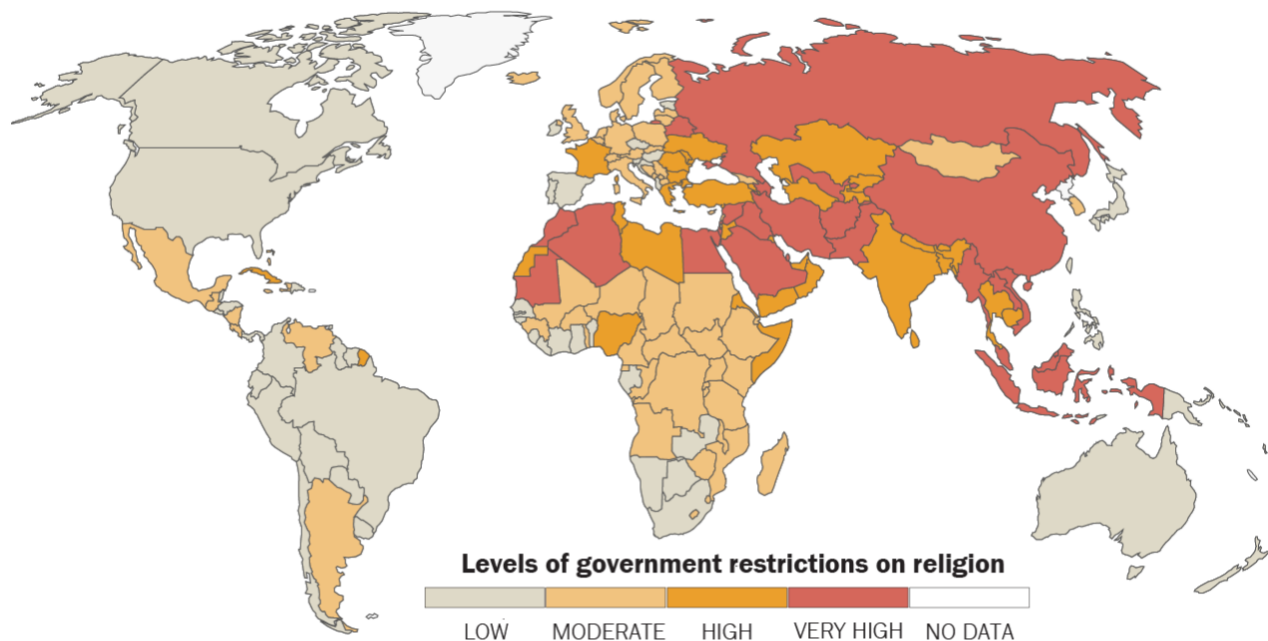
On the other hand, **sub-Saharan Africa's median GRI score declined from 3.0 in 2022 to 2.7 in 2023**. Fewer countries across the region had cases of physical harassment by governments against religious groups (26, down from 30 countries in 2022).

And **in the Americas, the median GRI score remained the same between 2022 and 2023, at 1.8 out of 10**. This was the lowest median score of all five regions studied.

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## Government restrictions on religion around the world in 2023

*Levels of government restrictions on religion in each country and territory studied, as of 2023*



Note: Based on the Government Restrictions Index's 10-point scale; scores of 0.0 to 2.3 are considered "low," 2.4 to 4.4 are considered "moderate," 4.5 to 6.5 are considered "high," and 6.6 to 10.0 are considered "very high." For details on how disputed territories are coded, read the Methodology.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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## Social hostilities involving religion, by region

Four of the world's five major geographic regions had overall increases on the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) in 2023: the Americas, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and the Middle East-North Africa region. Sub-Saharan Africa was the only region to register a decrease.

**The median SHI score in the Middle East-North Africa region went up to 4.5 in 2023 from 4.2 in 2022.** The increase was partially driven by a rising number of countries (seven, up from two) that experienced religion-related mob violence.

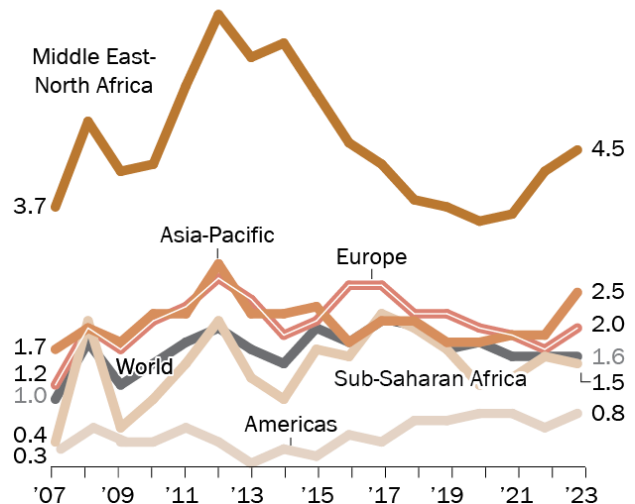
For example, in the Palestinian territories in February, a [Palestinian gunman killed two men](#) from the Jewish settlement of [Har Bracha](#), according to media reports. In retaliation, [about 400 Israeli settlers attacked](#) the Palestinian town of Huwara, resulting in one death, hundreds of injuries and destruction of property.<sup>9</sup> (Both attacks counted as social hostilities in the Palestinian territories because they occurred in the West Bank.)

Meanwhile, in southern Tunisia, the [historic El Hamma Synagogue](#), which includes the tomb of a 16th-century rabbi, was attacked in mid-October by hundreds of rioters. The attackers torched the building and defaced its walls with graffiti, reportedly to protest a hospital bombing in Gaza. At year's end, [Tunisian authorities had not arrested anyone](#) for the attack.

**The Asia-Pacific region's median SHI score rose from 1.9 in 2022 to 2.5 in 2023**, the second-highest score recorded for the region since 2007. (The peak was 2.9 in 2012.)

### Median levels of social hostilities involving religion rose in 4 out of 5 regions in 2023

*Median scores on the Social Hostilities Index (SHI)*



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.  
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<sup>9</sup> The killing of the two Jewish men from Har Bracha was categorized on the SHI as physical harassment of a religious group, while the retaliatory attack on Huwara was categorized as religion-related mob violence.

As in the Middle East-North Africa region, more Asia-Pacific countries had incidents of mob violence against religious groups in 2023 (eight) than in 2022 (three). In Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka, for example, [violent clashes occurred at the disputed Kurunthoormalai archaeological site](#), which both Buddhists and Hindus claim as the location of ancient temples belonging to their respective faiths. In mid-July, about 100 Sinhalese protesters (members of a [Sri Lankan ethno-religious group that is mostly Buddhist](#)) along with Buddhist monks, police officers and other officials tried to stop a Hindu ceremony at the site on the grounds that fire used in the ceremony would cause damage. Police stopped the fire and removed people from the site.

In Armenia, which we include in Asia, [there was mob violence against Jehovah's Witnesses](#). In June, a large group of protesters attempted to interrupt a regional meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses at a stadium by blasting noise through loudspeakers and throwing objects such as stones, firecrackers and food.

**Europe's median SHI score increased from 1.7 in 2022 to 2.0 in 2023**, partly because five more countries had religion-related terrorist activity than in the previous year. (All of these cases involved three or fewer casualties.) In Belgium, [a Tunisian man fatally shot two Swedish citizens](#) and injured another at a soccer match. The attacker, who claimed membership in the Islamic State group (ISIS), shared a video saying he was seeking to avenge recent burnings of the Quran in Sweden.

In another incident, [a French citizen of Iranian descent killed a German tourist and injured two others](#) near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, later telling police he acted in revenge for events in Gaza and the killing of Muslims in Afghanistan. The attacker reportedly had pledged allegiance to the militant group ISIS in a prerecorded video, and after the attack he told police he was angry that France was an "accomplice to what Israel is doing" in Gaza. (This study categorizes an attack as religion-related if the perpetrators target a religious group or claim religious motivations. In determining whether the perpetrators belong to a terrorist group, the study relies primarily on the [U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations](#).)

**The median SHI score for the Americas increased from 0.6 to 0.8**, matching the region's previous peak scores recorded in 2020 and 2021 – although in 2023 the Americas continued to have the lowest median score among all five regions. The small year-over-year increase stemmed, in part, from a rise in the number of countries in which religious groups

conducted or helped fund “conversion therapy” programs in which violence was used in an attempt to coerce people to become heterosexual.<sup>10</sup>

In Guatemala, for example, the U.S. State Department reported that conversion therapy centers in mostly rural parts of the country, partially funded and organized by evangelical churches, used tactics including [electroshock therapy and coerced sex acts](#) against lesbian, gay and transgender people. (The increase in SHI scores in the Americas reflects mentions of conversion therapy, since 2022, in the State Department Human Rights Reports.)

**Meanwhile, sub-Saharan Africa’s median SHI score declined slightly from 1.6 to 1.5.** This was the only region to experience declines in median levels on both the SHI and GRI in 2023. Still, the region contained the country with the world’s highest SHI score – Nigeria, whose score was 9.0, up from 8.7 the previous year.

Nigeria saw [a rise in the number of deaths from attacks by the militant groups Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa](#), who targeted both Christians and Muslims, according to the U.S. State Department. Multiple, violent clashes between mainly Muslim herders and Christian farmers over

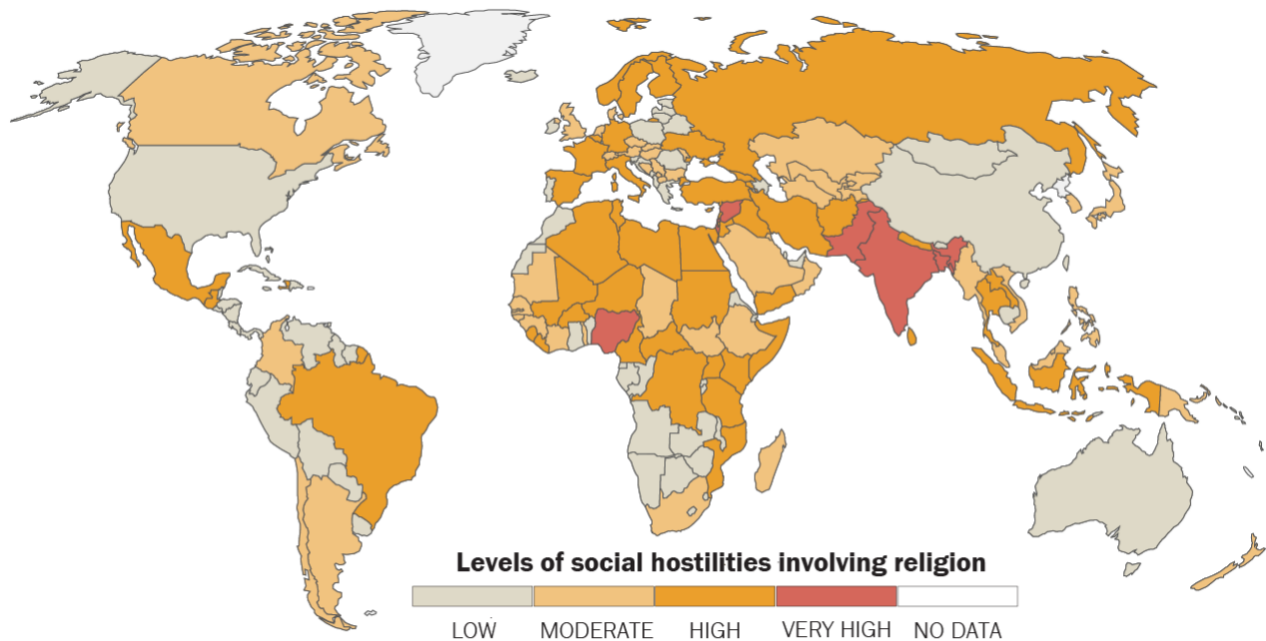
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<sup>10</sup> Incidents in which religious groups or individuals use violence or threats of violence to enforce some type of religious norm are categorized as social hostilities (refer to SHI.Q.9 in [Appendix D](#) or [download the dataset](#) to refer to it in the Codebook used in this study).

land and resources in Nigeria also had an ethno-religious component. Additionally, there were attacks on religious groups by Nigerian bandits and criminal gangs during the course of the year.

## Social hostilities involving religion around the world in 2023

*Level of social hostilities involving religion in each country and territory studied, as of 2023*



Note: Based on the Social Hostilities Index's 10-point scale; scores of 0.0 to 1.4 are considered "low," 1.5 to 3.5 are considered "moderate," 3.6 to 7.1 are considered "high," and 7.2 to 10.0 are considered "very high." For details on how disputed territories are coded, read the Methodology.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

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## Religious restrictions in the 25 most populous countries in 2023

Of the 25 most populous countries in the world, India, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia had the highest overall levels of government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion in 2023.<sup>11</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, South Africa, the United States, Japan, the Philippines and the United Kingdom had the lowest levels among the 25 most populous countries.

The findings are based on each country's combined scores on two indexes. The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) includes 20 indicators of how government officials, laws and policies restrict religion. The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) consists of 13 indicators of religion-related hostilities by private individuals, groups and organizations. Scores on each index range from 0 to 10.

The 25 countries analyzed here contain roughly three-quarters of the global population. However, the restrictions and hostilities measured on these indexes don't necessarily affect all people in a country equally. They may have a disproportionate impact on religious minorities.

This section is part of a wider Pew Research Center study of restrictions on religion around the world in 2023. Read the [report overview](#) for a broader understanding of the study's key findings. The rest of this section looks at the top 25 countries' scores on each index.

### Government Restrictions Index (GRI)

Of the world's 25 largest countries, those with the highest GRI scores in 2023 were China, Iran, Indonesia, Egypt and Russia. All five had *very high* GRI scores (from 6.6 to 10 points).

On the opposite end of the scale, South Africa, Japan, the Philippines, the U.S. and Brazil had the lowest levels of government restrictions on religion among the 25 most populous countries. They all fell in the low category on the index (from 0 to 2.3 points). For more details on how index categories are defined, refer to the [Methodology](#).

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<sup>11</sup> The population figures used for this analysis are estimates for 2020 that were published in the 2024 revision of the UN Population Division's [World Population Prospects](#).

## Social Hostilities Index (SHI)

In 2023, Nigeria, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Egypt had the highest levels of social hostilities involving religion among the 25 most populous countries. All except Egypt had very high scores (from 7.2 to 10 points) on the SHI, while Egypt fell into the index's high category (3.6 to 7.1).

At the other end of the scale are China, the U.S., South Africa, Japan and Vietnam, which had the lowest social hostilities scores among these 25 countries. China and the U.S. had low SHI scores (between 0.0 and 1.4), while South Africa, Japan and Vietnam were in the moderate category (between 1.5 and 3.5).

Some of the most populous countries' scores fell in the same category on both indexes. For instance, Pakistan had very high levels of both government restrictions *and* social hostilities. France had high scores on both the GRI and SHI, while the U.K. had moderate scores on both indexes.

However, some other countries had high or very high GRI scores but moderate or low SHI scores. China, for example, had *very high* levels of government restrictions on religion in 2023 but *low* levels of social hostilities. (This also was true for China in each of the four prior years, starting in 2019.)

Meanwhile, Vietnam had very high levels of government restrictions in 2023 but moderate levels of social hostilities.

No country among the 25 most populous had low levels of government restrictions but very high levels of social hostilities.

## How the index scores are classified

|           | GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS INDEX | SOCIAL HOSTILITIES INDEX |
|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very high | 6.6 to 10.0                   | 7.2 to 10.0              |
| High      | 4.5 to 6.5                    | 3.6 to 7.1               |
| Moderate  | 2.4 to 4.4                    | 1.5 to 3.5               |
| Low       | 0.0 to 2.3                    | 0.0 to 1.4               |

Note: The analysis categorizes the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities in each country by percentiles. As the benchmark, it uses the results from the baseline year of the study (the year ending in mid-2007). Scores in the top 5% on each index in mid-2007 were categorized as "very high." The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as "high," and the following 20% were categorized as "moderate." The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as "low."

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.

"More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023"

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For more information on the relationship between countries' GRI and SHI scores, refer to [a previous Pew Research Center analysis](#). Refer to [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#) for details on individual countries' categories on the two indexes in 2023.

## How GRI scores changed from 2022 to 2023

Twenty-four of the 25 most populous countries either had small changes (less than 1 point) or no change on the GRI in 2023.

Several countries switched between categories even though the change was relatively small, numerically. For example, Tanzania had a decrease of 0.8 points (from 5.0 to 4.2), but it was enough to shift Tanzania out of the high category and into the moderate GRI level.<sup>12</sup> One reason for the lower score was that unlike in the previous year, the sources used in this study contained no reports in 2023 of [Tanzanian government harassment of converts to Christianity](#).

Turkey also had a small decrease in its GRI score (from 6.7 to 6.3) which lowered it from the very high category in 2022 to the high GRI level in 2023. This was partly because in 2023 the sources used in the study did not report any arrests in Turkey of [people accused of “insulting religious values” on social media](#), as there had been the previous year.

Germany had the biggest GRI change, a full point, among the 25 most populous countries. Its score rose from 3.0 in 2022 to 4.0 in 2023, in part because authorities in cities and airports across the country [restricted Jehovah's Witnesses from using temporary display carts for religious literature](#), according to the U.S. State Department's 2023 report on International Religious Freedom. (Even with the change, Germany's GRI score remained moderate.)

## How SHI scores changed from 2022 to 2023

Of the 25 most populous countries, more had changes on the Social Hostilities Index than on the Government Restrictions Index in 2023. Still, most of these countries (14) had only small changes on the SHI. Ten countries had modest changes (between 1.0 and 1.9 points), including seven with modest *increases* and three with modest *decreases*. One country among the 25 most populous – the U.S. – had no change in its SHI score.

The seven countries with modest SHI increases included Japan, which moved into the moderate SHI category when its score increased from 1.1 to 2.6 points. This was due in part to [a reported](#)

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<sup>12</sup> For ease of comprehension, this study publishes rounded index scores for each country. Using these calculations, Tanzania's change in GRI score is 0.8. However, when calculating the indexes, we used raw (unrounded) scores, and for Tanzania the change in raw score (0.735) rounds to 0.7.

[increase in physical harassment and threats toward Jehovah's Witnesses](#); in June, for example, [a man kicked and injured a Jehovah's Witness in her 70s while she was preaching](#).

And Turkey, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo all moved from the moderate to the high SHI category. In Tanzania, there were tensions between Christians and Muslims stemming from perceived government favoritism toward Christians. In September, a viral video by a Muslim man accused Christians of [making noise to disrupt the Islamic call to prayer](#), according to the State Department. The video was said to have “stoked anger among Muslims already frustrated with the political situation in Zanzibar.” The tensions, however, did not lead to violence. (Zanzibar is a semiautonomous region in the country.)

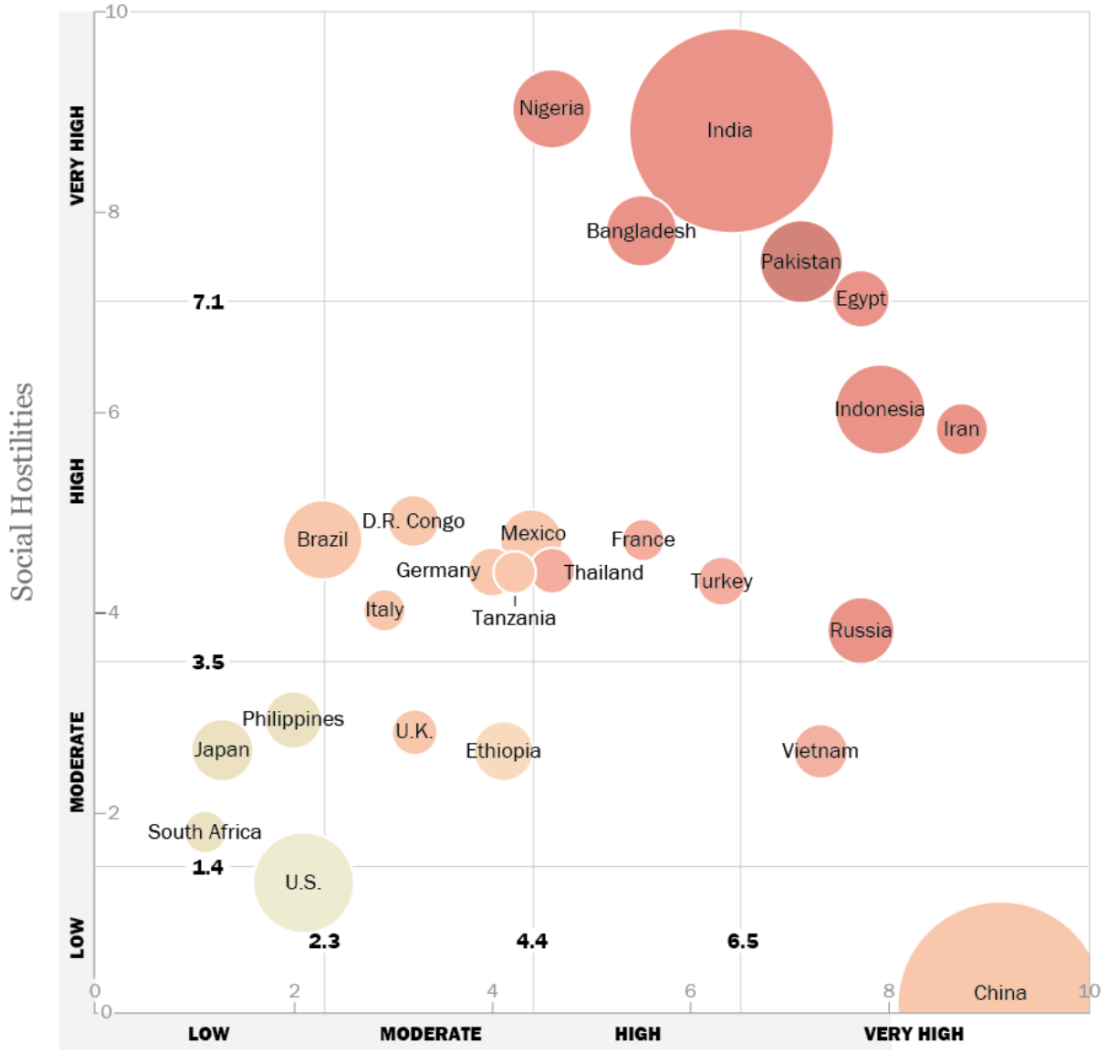
In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, continued violence by ISIS-DRC led to a higher SHI score. In March, the Islamist militant group [targeted Christians in the village of Mukondi in the eastern part of the country](#), killing at least 38, injuring 17 others and burning Christian homes. The group also took credit for attacks that month on Christians in other villages that reportedly took the lives of 45 people, including a priest.

Bangladesh's increased SHI score (from 6.1 to 7.8 points) moved it from the high to the very high category on the index in 2023. The increase was mostly due to [deaths related to mob violence reported against minority religious groups](#) in the Muslim-majority country. (To read more about Bangladesh's score change and about other countries that changed SHI categories, refer to our [analysis of countries with the most extensive social hostilities](#).)

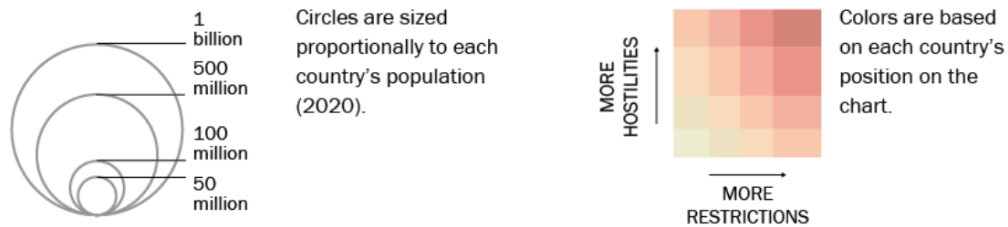
Ethiopia and the Philippines had modest declines in their SHI scores that were enough to shift them from the high category to the moderate level of social hostilities. France's score dropped by more than a point, from 5.9 to 4.7, but France remained in the high SHI category.

### Restrictions on religion in the world's 25 most populous countries

Among the world's 25 most populous countries, India, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia had the highest levels of overall restrictions on religion (when considering both government restrictions and social hostilities). South Africa, the United States, Japan, the Philippines and the United Kingdom had the lowest levels. Scores on each 10-point index are for the calendar year 2023.



#### Government Restrictions



Note: Countries in the upper right have the most restrictions and hostilities; those in the lower left have the least restrictions and hostilities.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details. Population figures are UN Population Division estimates for 2020.

"More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023"

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## Methodology

This is the 16th time Pew Research Center has measured restrictions on religion around the globe.<sup>13</sup> This report, which includes data for the year ending Dec. 31, 2023, generally follows the same methodology as previous reports.

Pew Research Center uses two 10-point indexes – the Government Restrictions Index (GRI) and the Social Hostilities Index (SHI) – to rate 198 countries and self-governing territories on their levels of restrictions.<sup>14</sup> This report analyzes changes in restrictions on an annual basis, focusing on the 2023 calendar year.

The study categorizes the direction and degree of change in each country’s scores in two ways: numerically and by percentile. First, countries are grouped into categories depending on the size of the numeric change in their scores from year to year on the two indexes: changes of 2 points or more in either direction, changes of at least 1 point but less than 2 points, changes of less than 1 point, or no change at all (refer to the chart at right).

Changes in overall levels of restrictions are calculated for each country by comparing its scores on both indexes (the GRI and the SHI) from year to year. When a country’s scores on the GRI and the SHI changed in the same direction (both increased or both decreased), the greater amount of change determines the category. For instance, if the country’s GRI score increased by 0.8 and its SHI score increased by 1.5, the country was put into the overall “1.0-1.9 increase” category. When a country’s score increased on one index but decreased on the other, the difference between the amounts of change determines the grouping. For example, if the country’s GRI score increased by 2.0 and its SHI score decreased by 1.5, the country went into the overall “0.1-0.9 increase” category. When a country’s score on one index stayed the same, the amount of change on the other index is used to assign the category.

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### Index point change

*Categories for assessing index score changes between years (points)*

2.0 or more increase

1.0 to 1.9 increase

0.1 to 0.9 increase

No change

0.1 to 0.9 decrease

1.0 to 1.9 decrease

2.0 or more decrease

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<sup>13</sup> Refer to the Methodology of Pew Research Center’s 2009 report [“Global Restrictions on Religion”](#) for a discussion of the conceptual basis for measuring restrictions on religion.

<sup>14</sup> Some earlier reports provided scores for 197 countries and territories. This report includes South Sudan (which separated from Sudan in July 2011), bringing the total to 198 countries and territories.

Second, this report categorizes the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities in each country by percentiles. As the benchmark, it uses the results from the baseline year of the study (the year ending in mid-2007). Scores in the top 5% on each index in mid-2007 were categorized as “very high.” The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as “high” and the following 20% were categorized as “moderate.” The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as “low.”

Refer to the table to the right for the index score thresholds as determined from the mid-2007 data. These thresholds are applied to all subsequent years of data.

## Overview of procedures

The methodology used by the Center to assess and compare restrictions on religion was developed by Brian J. Grim, former Pew Research Center senior researcher and director of cross-national data, in consultation with other Center staff members, building on a methodology that Grim and Professor Roger Finke developed while at Penn State University’s Association of Religion Data Archives.<sup>15</sup> The goal was to devise quantifiable, objective and transparent measures of the extent to which governments and societal groups impinge on the practice of religion. The findings were used to rate countries and self-governing territories on two indexes that are reproducible and can be periodically updated.

This research goes beyond previous efforts to assess restrictions on religion in several ways. First, the Center coded (categorized and counted) data from more than a dozen published cross-national sources, providing a high degree of confidence in the findings. Pew Research Center coders looked to the sources for only specific, well-documented facts, not opinions or commentary.

## How the index scores are classified

|           | GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS INDEX | SOCIAL HOSTILITIES INDEX |
|-----------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Very high | 6.6 to 10.0                   | 7.2 to 10.0              |
| High      | 4.5 to 6.5                    | 3.6 to 7.1               |
| Moderate  | 2.4 to 4.4                    | 1.5 to 3.5               |
| Low       | 0.0 to 2.3                    | 0.0 to 1.4               |

Note: The analysis categorizes the levels of government restrictions and social hostilities in each country by percentiles. As the benchmark, it uses the results from the baseline year of the study (the year ending in mid-2007). Scores in the top 5% on each index in mid-2007 were categorized as “very high.” The next highest 15% of scores were categorized as “high,” and the following 20% were categorized as “moderate.” The bottom 60% of scores were categorized as “low.”

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details. “More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023”

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<sup>15</sup> Refer to Grim, Brian J., and Roger Finke. 2006. “[International Religion Indexes: Government Regulation, Government Favoritism, and Social Regulation of Religion.](#)” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion.*

Second, Center staff used extensive data verification checks that reflect generally accepted best practices for such studies, such as double-blind coding (coders do not see each other’s ratings), interrater reliability assessments (checking for consistency among coders) and carefully monitored protocols to reconcile discrepancies among coders.

Third, the coding took into account whether the perpetrators of religion-related violence were government or private actors. The coding also identified how widespread and intensive the restrictions were in each country.

Fourth, one of the most valuable contributions of the indexes and the questions used to construct them (read the [section on the coding instrument](#) later in the Methodology) is their ability to chart change over time.

## Countries and territories

The 198 countries and territories covered by the study contain more than 99.5% of the world’s population. They include 192 of the 193 member states of the United Nations as of 2023, plus six territories – Kosovo, Hong Kong, Macao, the Palestinian territories, Taiwan and Western Sahara.<sup>16</sup> Reporting on these territories does not imply any position on what their international political status should be, only recognition that the de facto situations in these territories require separate analysis.

Although the 198 countries and territories vary widely in size, population, wealth, ethnic diversity, religious makeup and form of government, the study does not attempt to adjust for such differences. Poor countries are not scored differently on the indexes than wealthy ones. Countries with diverse ethnic and religious populations are not “expected” to have more social hostilities than countries with more homogeneous populations. And democracies are not assessed more leniently or harshly than authoritarian regimes.

Note that geographic names differ between sources and change through history. For example, Myanmar is also called Burma, Eswatini was formerly Swaziland and the Czech Republic is

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<sup>16</sup> The one United Nations member state not included in the study is North Korea. The sources clearly indicate that North Korea’s government is among the most repressive in the world with respect to religion as well as other civil and political liberties. The U.S. State Department’s “[2015 Report on International Religious Freedom](#),” for example, says that “religious freedom does not exist in North Korea despite the constitutional guarantee for the freedom of religion,” and there are no indications that this changed in 2022. But because North Korean society is effectively closed to outsiders and independent observers lack regular access to the country, the sources were unable to provide the kind of specific, timely information that Pew Research Center categorized and counted (“coded,” in social science parlance) for this quantitative study. Therefore, the report does not include scores for North Korea.

officially Czechia. Names used in this report are largely based on common English-language usage in the United States (e.g., *East Timor* and *Ivory Coast* rather than *Timor-Leste* and *Côte d’Ivoire*).

### **Western Sahara coding**

Western Sahara is considered a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations. Morocco administers part of the territory using the Moroccan Constitution and its laws, including laws affecting religious freedom.<sup>17</sup> As a consequence, this report considers the policies and actions of the Moroccan government when assessing government restrictions on religion in Western Sahara. The government restrictions coding reflects Morocco’s de facto control over parts of Western Sahara and is not intended as a Pew Research Center position on the status of the territory. When researchers evaluate social hostilities involving religion, Western Sahara and Morocco are coded separately.

### **Information sources**

In the latest year of the study, Pew Research Center identified 19 widely available, frequently cited sources of information on government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion around the world. This study includes four sources that were not used in the baseline report on religious restrictions. (Read the section below for more details on the new information sources.)

The primary and secondary sources, which are listed below, include reports from U.S. government agencies, several independent, nongovernmental organizations, and a variety of European and UN bodies. Although most of these organizations are based in Western countries, many of them depend on local staff to collect information across the globe. As previously noted, the Center did not use the commentaries, opinions or normative judgments of the sources; the sources were combed only for factual information on specific policies and actions.

### **Primary and secondary sources for 2023**

1. Country constitutions
2. U.S. State Department annual Reports on International Religious Freedom
3. U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom annual reports and database

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. State Department. June 2020. [“Western Sahara.”](#) International Religious Freedom Report for 2019. Refer also to United Nations. [“Non-Self-Governing Territories.”](#) The United Nations and Decolonization.

4. UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief reports
5. Human Rights First reports in first and second years of coding; Freedom House reports in subsequent years of coding
6. Human Rights Watch topical reports
7. International Crisis Group country reports and database
8. European Union annual reports on human rights
9. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports
10. U.S. State Department annual Country Reports on Terrorism
11. Anti-Defamation League reports
12. U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices
13. Uppsala University's Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Armed Conflict Database
14. Human Rights Without Frontiers "Freedom of Religion or Belief" newsletters
15. Amnesty International Country Profiles
16. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Population Statistics Database
17. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's Global Internal Displacement Database
18. FBI Hate Crime Reports (for information on the situation in the United States)
19. American Civil Liberties Union (for information on the situation in the United States)

As noted, this study includes three sources that were not included in Pew Research Center's first report on global restrictions on religion: Freedom House reports, Uppsala University's Armed Conflict Database and the "Freedom of Religion or Belief" newsletters from Human Rights Without Frontiers.

The Freedom House reports titled “Freedom in the World” have replaced Human Rights First reports, which have not been updated since mid-2008. Researchers also began using “Freedom on the Net” reports by Freedom House starting with 2019 data to code for restrictions on religious groups that occur through the internet. The Uppsala Armed Conflict Database provides information on the number of people affected by religion-related armed conflicts, supplementing other sources. The Human Rights Without Frontiers “Freedom of Religion or Belief” newsletters have replaced the Hudson Institute’s “Religious Freedom in the World” publication by Paul Marshall, which has not been updated since its release in 2008. Human Rights Without Frontiers is a nongovernmental organization based in Brussels that has affiliated offices throughout the world.

In 2021, 2022 and 2023, researchers consulted a comprehensive list of religious freedom cases in U.S. courts, which was compiled by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). However, the Center did not include the ACLU’s opinions or positions on these cases in the coding for the U.S.

For 2023 data, researchers consulted a database compiled by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for information on people detained for religion or belief, supplementing other sources.

### **A note on previous sources that were unavailable in 2023**

Between 2013 and 2020, Pew Research Center used data from the Global Terrorism Database, maintained by the University of Maryland’s National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) to code and categorize information on religion-related terrorism. This data was not available at the time researchers collected information for the current report covering 2023 events. To analyze religion-related terrorism for the report on 2023 data, the Center used information from its usual annual sources, including the International Crisis Group’s CrisisWatch Database, the U.S. State Department’s annual “Country Reports on Terrorism,” along with its annual “International Religious Freedom” reports and “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.” Researchers also used annual reports from Freedom House, Amnesty International, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Human Rights Watch. (One source used in earlier reports, the U.S. government’s Worldwide Incident Tracking System, or WITS, is no longer available online.) Prior to 2013, the report relied only on the International Crisis Group reports, Uppsala University’s Armed Conflict Database and the U.S. State Department reports for information on religion-related terrorism.

In most years, Pew Research Center has included Amnesty International’s country profiles as one of the sources used for this study. These profiles were not updated for the year 2018, so they are

absent as a source for the report covering 2018 events. Amnesty International reports were used for this report covering 2023 events, however.

The study also has used the U.S. Department of Justice’s “Religious Freedom in Focus” newsletters and reports to code information for the United States in most years. These reports were not available for 2021, 2022 and 2023. The U.S. State Department’s “Report on International Religious Freedom” was unavailable for Western Sahara in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023. The study has used the United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office annual reports on human rights in previous years, but it was not available for 2023.

While some of the changes in religious restrictions noted in this study could reflect the use of more up-to-date and/or better informational sources, Pew Research Center staff monitor the impact of source information variability each year and have found no evidence of overall informational bias. (For additional discussion, read the “Potential biases” section in the 2014 report, “[Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High](#).”)

## The coding instrument

As explained in more detail below, Pew Research Center staff developed a battery of questions similar to a survey questionnaire. Coders consulted the primary and secondary sources in order to answer the questions separately for each country. While the U.S. State Department’s annual “Reports on International Religious Freedom” generally contained the most comprehensive information, the other sources provided additional factual detail that was used to settle ambiguities, resolve contradictions and help in the proper scoring of each question.

The questionnaire, or coding instrument, generated a set of numerical measures on restrictions in each country. It also made it possible to see how government restrictions intersect with broader social tensions and incidents of violence or intimidation by private actors. The coding instrument with the list of questions used for this report is shown in the [results by country](#).

The coding process required the coders to check all the sources for each country. Coders determined whether each source provided information critical to assigning a score; had supporting information but did not result in new facts; or had no available information on that particular country. Multiple sources of information were available for all countries and territories with populations greater than 1 million. Most of the countries and territories analyzed by the Center had multiple sources; only small (predominantly island) countries had a single source, namely the U.S. State Department reports.

Coding the United States presented a special problem since it is not included in the U.S. State Department’s annual “Reports on International Religious Freedom.” Accordingly, Pew Research Center coders also looked at reports from the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI on violations of religious freedom in the U.S., in addition to consulting all the primary and secondary sources, including reports by the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, the International Crisis Group and the U.K. Foreign & Commonwealth Office, many of which contain data on the U.S.

## **The coding process**

Pew Research Center employed strict training and rigorous coding protocols to make its coding as objective and reproducible as possible. Coders worked directly under an experienced researcher’s supervision, with additional direction and support provided by other Center researchers. The coders underwent an intensive training period that included a thorough overview of the research objectives, information sources and methodology.

Countries were double-blind coded by two coders (coders did not see each other’s ratings), and the initial ratings were entered into an electronic document (coding instrument) including details on each incident. The coders began by filling out the coding instrument for each country using the information source that had the most comprehensive information. The protocol for each coder was to answer every question on which information was available in the initial source. Once a coder had completed that process, they then turned to the other sources. As new information was found, this was also coded and the source duly noted. Whenever ambiguities or contradictions arose, the source providing the most detailed, clearly documented evidence was used.

After two coders had separately completed the coding instrument for a particular country, their scores were compared by a research analyst. Areas of discrepancy were discussed at length with the coders and were reconciled in order to arrive at a single score on each question for each country. The data for each country was then combined into a master file, and the answers and substantiating evidence were entered into a database.

After data collection for all countries was completed, Pew Research Center coders and researchers compared the scores from calendar year 2023 with those from the previous year, ending Dec. 31, 2022. They identified scores that had changed and analyzed the substantiating evidence for each year to make sure the change was substantive and not the result of coder error. Throughout this process, the coding instrument itself was continually monitored for possible defects. The questions were designed to be precise, comprehensive and objective so that, based on the same data and definitions, the coding could be reliably reproduced by others with the same results. At the same

time, the Center has attempted to minimize changes to the coding instrument as much as possible to ensure all changes between years are the result of actual changes in restrictions and hostilities, not changes in methodology.

Pew Research Center staff generally found few cases in which one source contradicted another. When contradictions did arise – such as when sources provided differing estimates of the number of people displaced due to religion-related violence – the source that cited the most specific documentation was used. The coders were instructed to disregard broad, unsubstantiated generalizations regarding abuses and to focus on reports that contained clear, precise documentation and factual details, such as names, dates and places where incidents occurred.

Center staff compared coders' scores for all questions for each of the 198 countries and territories included in the study, computing the degree to which the scores matched. The interrater reliability score across all variables was 0.72. Scores near or above 0.7 are generally considered good.

The data verification procedures went beyond the interrater reliability statistics. They also involved comparing the answers on the main measures for each country with other closely related questions in the dataset. This provided a practical way to test the internal reliability of the data.

In previous years, Pew Research Center staff also checked the reliability of the coded data by comparing it with similar, though more limited, religious restrictions datasets. In particular, published government and social regulation of religion index scores are available from the Association of Religion Data Archives (for three years of data) and the Hudson Institute (for one year of data), which makes them ideal measures for cross-validation. The review process found very few significant discrepancies in the coded data; changes were made only if warranted by a further review of the primary and secondary sources.

## **Restriction of religion indexes**

The Government Restrictions Index (GRI) is based on 20 indicators of ways that national and local governments restrict religion, including through coercion and force. The Social Hostilities Index (SHI) is based on 13 indicators of ways in which private individuals and social groups infringe upon religious beliefs and practices, including religiously biased crimes, mob violence and efforts to stop particular religious groups from growing or operating. The study also counted the number and types of documented incidents of religion-related violence, including terrorism and armed conflict.

## Government Restrictions Index

Coding multiple indicators makes it possible to construct a Government Restrictions Index of sufficient gradation to allow for meaningful cross-national comparisons. An additional advantage of using multiple indicators is that it helps mitigate the effects of measurement error in any one variable, providing greater confidence in the overall measure.

Pew Research Center coded 20 indicators of government restrictions on religion (refer to the [summary of results](#)). These 20 items were added together to create the GRI. In two cases, these items represent an aggregation of several closely related questions: Measures of five types of physical abuses are combined into a single variable (GRI Q.19), and seven questions measuring aspects of government favoritism are combined into an overall favoritism scale (GRI Q.20 is a summary variable showing whether a country received the maximum score on one or more of the seven questions).

The GRI is a fine-grained measure created by adding the 20 items on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 indicating very low levels of government restrictions on religion and 10 indicating very high levels of restrictions. The 20 questions that form the GRI are coded in a standard scale from 0 to 1.0 point, while gradations among the answers allowed for partial points to be given for lesser degrees of the particular government restriction being measured. The overall value of the index was calculated and proportionally adjusted – so that it had a maximum value of 10 and a possible range of 0 to 10 – by dividing the sum of the variables by two.

A test of whether the 20 items were statistically reliable as a single index produced a scale reliability coefficient of 0.91 for calendar year 2023. Since coefficients of 0.7 or higher are generally considered acceptable, it was statistically appropriate to combine these 20 items into a single index.

## Social Hostilities Index

In addition to government restrictions, violence and intimidation in societies also can limit religious beliefs and practices. Accordingly, Pew Research Center staff tracked more than a dozen indicators of social impediments on religion. Once again, coding multiple indicators made it possible to construct an index that shows gradations of severity or intensity and allows for comparisons among countries. The summary of results contains the 13 items used by Center staff to create the Social Hostilities Index.

The SHI was constructed by adding together the 13 indicators based on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 indicating very low impediments to religious beliefs and practices, and 10 indicating very high

impediments. The various questions that form the index are coded in a standard scale from 0 to 1.0 point, while gradations among the answers allow for partial points to be given for lesser degrees of the particular hostilities being measured. The indicators were added together and set to have a possible range of 0 to 10 by dividing the sum of the variables by 1.3.

As with the Government Restrictions Index, various types of violence and intimidation were combined. A test of whether these 13 items were statistically reliable as a single index produced a scale reliability coefficient of 0.87. Since coefficients of 0.7 or higher are generally considered acceptable, it was statistically appropriate to combine these items into a single index.

### **How examples are coded**

Examples of each type of government restriction or social hostility are generally counted in a single measure on the GRI or SHI. For instance, a restriction on proselytizing (sharing one's faith with the intent of persuading another to join the faith) is not also counted as a restriction on conversion (an individual changing their religion). In some situations, however, an individual restriction or hostility may be part of a broader set of restrictions or hostilities. For instance, a mob attack by members of one religious group on an individual of another religion may be an isolated event, counted only under question SHI Q.2: "Was there mob violence related to religion?" However, if such an attack triggers repeated attacks between religious groups, it also might be an indication of sectarian or communal violence, which by definition involves two or more religious groups facing off in repeated clashes. In such a case, the mob attack also would be counted under question SHI Q.3: "Were there acts of sectarian or communal violence between religious groups?" (Refer to the [summary of results](#).)

For a number of questions on the Social Hostilities Index (SHI. Q.6, Q.7, Q.8, Q.9, Q.10, Q.11, Q.12 and Q.13), coders look at incidents in the U.S. State Department's "International Religious Freedom" reports from the previous two calendar years to capture ongoing social hostilities in a country.

### **Social harassment and intimidation coding**

Beginning with data for 2017, researchers updated the way social harassment and intimidation of religion is calculated. There are six components that encompass question SHI Q.1.a: "Were there crimes, malicious acts or violence motivated by religious hatred or bias?" The six components include harassment/intimidation, property damage, detentions/abductions, displacement from homes, physical assaults and deaths (refer to the [results by country](#)). For the "harassment/intimidation" measure, researchers made an update to count "limited" harassment as 0.5 points and "widespread" harassment as 1.0 point for data covering 2017 onward. "Limited"

means infrequent or isolated and indicates that the harassment seems unlikely to continue. “Widespread” does not necessarily mean the whole country, but it could be present in certain regions, have potential of spreading to other regions, affect several groups, indicate a substantial uptick in the number of cases of abuse, or indicate a possible campaign against a certain religion(s) or practice(s).

The other five components of SHI.Q.1.a are coded as “Yes” (1.0 point) or “No” (0 points) based on whether incidents in each subcategory occurred. Compared with the previous method, this update to coding “limited” and “widespread” intimidation and harassment resulted in a change of no more than 0.1 points to the SHI score of 53 countries in 2017.

### **Effects of consolidating to a new database**

For the first few years of this study, information on the number, types and locations of incidents of government force and social violence toward religious groups, as well as deference to religious authorities in matters of law, were coded at the province level. (Refer to the [example of data coding](#) on pages 45-48 of the December 2009 baseline report.) Each year, the province numbers were summed and put into separate country-level files. Following the publication of the August 2011 report, Pew Research Center staff created a database that integrated all province- and country-level data on religious restrictions. During this process, Center staff reviewed any discrepancies between province files and the sums that had been transferred to the country files and made appropriate corrections. The adjustments made were relatively minor and had small effects on index scores for countries, on average less than 0.005 on the 10-point indexes. Consolidating the data into a database also entailed a review of the data on harassment of religious groups. In particular, instances of harassment from the year ending in mid-2007 were stored as open-ended questions, and in a few cases, they were recoded to match the categories used in subsequent years.

Beginning with data covering 2012, Pew Research Center stopped collecting data at the province level; all data was coded at the country level.

### **Changing time period of analysis**

This is the 13th time Pew Research Center has analyzed restrictions on religion in a calendar year. Previous reports analyzed 12-month periods from July 1 to June 30 (e.g., July 1, 2009-June 30, 2010). The shift to calendar years was made in part because most of the primary and secondary sources used in this study are based on calendar years.

Because of the shift in time frame, previous studies did not report directly on incidents that occurred during the period from July 1 to Dec. 31, 2010. While this misses some incidents that occurred during the second half of 2010, events that had an ongoing impact – such as a change to a country’s constitution or the outbreak of a religion-related war – were captured by the coding. Researchers for the study carefully reviewed the situation in each country and territory during this six-month period and ensured that restrictions with an ongoing impact were not overlooked.

### **Religion-related terrorism and armed conflict**

Terrorism and war can have huge direct and indirect effects on religious groups, including destroying religious sites, displacing whole communities and inflaming sectarian passions. Accordingly, Pew Research Center tallied the number, location, and consequences of religion-related terrorism and armed conflict around the world, as reported in the same primary and secondary sources used to document other forms of intimidation and violence. However, war and terrorism are complex enough that it is not always possible to determine the degree to which they are religiously motivated or state sponsored. Out of an abundance of caution, this study does not include them in the Government Restrictions Index. They are factored instead into the Social Hostilities Index, which includes one question specifically about religion-related terrorism and one question specifically about religion-related war or armed conflict. In addition, other measures in both indexes are likely to pick up spillover effects of war and terrorism on the level of religious tensions in society. For example, hate crimes, mob violence and sectarian fighting that occur in the aftermath of a terrorist attack or in the context of a religion-related war would be counted in the Social Hostilities Index, and laws or policies that clearly discriminate against a particular religious group would be registered on the Government Restrictions Index.

For the purposes of this study, the term “religion-related terrorism” is defined as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatants by subnational groups or clandestine agents that have some identifiable religious ideology or religious motivation. It also includes acts carried out by groups that have a nonreligious identity but affect religious personnel, such as clergy. Readers should note that it is the political character and motivation of the groups, not the type of violence, that is at issue here. For instance, a bombing would not be classified as religion-related terrorism if there was no clearly discernible religious ideology or bias behind it, unless it was directed at religious personnel. For the 2013-2020 coding years, the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) was used to find information on religion-related terrorism.

Also, this study categorizes an attack as religion-related if the perpetrators target a religious group or claim religious motivations. In determining whether the perpetrators belong to a terrorist

group, the study relies primarily on the [U.S. State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations](#).

During the 2013-2020 period, researchers used the GTD’s classification of terrorist incidents, which counted attacks on military targets as terrorism. Starting with 2021 events, researchers made the decision *not* to count incidents involving police or military targets since they would not qualify as noncombatant targets.

“Religion-related war or armed conflict” is defined as armed conflict (a conflict that involves sustained casualties over time or more than 1,000 battle deaths) in which religious rhetoric is commonly used to justify the use of force, or in which one or more of the combatants primarily identifies itself or the opposing side by religion.

### **Changes to Somalia’s coding**

Starting with data covering 2013, researchers changed the way they coded government restrictions in Somalia. In previous years of the study, researchers had coded actions by the al-Shabab rebel group as government restrictions, largely because the group effectively controlled large swathes of Somali territory. The extent of al-Shabab control over Somali territory decreased in calendar year 2013, so researchers did not code their actions as government restrictions but rather as social hostilities. Researchers continued to follow this policy when coding data for 2023.

### **Crimea and other disputed territories coding**

Starting with data covering 2015, researchers coded incidents occurring in Crimea as part of Russia’s GRI and SHI scores. This is to reflect Russia’s de facto control over Crimea and is not intended as a Pew Research Center position on the de jure status of the territory, which the United Nations recognizes as part of Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

For events starting in 2022, researchers included restrictions occurring in regions invaded by Russian forces during the year under Russia’s GRI score instead of Ukraine’s GRI score. When reviewing events that occurred in 2022 and in 2023, researchers counted restrictions in regions controlled by Russian armed forces during that year as contributing to Russia’s GRI score instead of Ukraine’s GRI score. The regions include Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, Mykolayiv and Zaporizhzhya oblasts.<sup>19</sup> This reflects Russia’s de facto control over these regions and is not intended as a Pew Research Center position on the de jure status of these regions, which the

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations. March 2014. “[Territorial integrity of Ukraine](#).” Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on March 27, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. State Department. May 2023. “[Ukraine: Russia-Occupied Territories of Ukraine](#).” 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom.

United Nations recognizes as part of Ukraine. Social hostilities in these regions were coded under Ukraine's SHI for 2022 and 2023.

### **Israel and Palestinian territories coding**

Throughout the course of the study, actions by the Israeli government or security forces in either Israel or the Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza) are coded as part of Israel's GRI. Actions by the Palestinian Authority are coded as part of the GRI for the Palestinian territories.

Social hostilities carried out by private individuals and groups, including terrorist groups, are coded based on *where* they occurred. For example, if Israeli settlers attack houses of worship in the West Bank, it is coded as SHI for the Palestinian territories. East Jerusalem is coded as Palestinian territories; West Jerusalem is coded as Israel.

Actions by Hamas are coded as religion-related terrorism on the SHI due to its designation as a [foreign terrorist organization](#) by the U.S. State Department and because of the group's [religious motives as outlined in its charter](#). Attacks by Hamas on Israeli territory are coded as Israel's SHI.

### **Changes to Yemen's coding**

Starting with data covering 2016, researchers changed the way they coded social hostilities in Yemen. In previous years of the study, researchers had coded actions by Houthi rebels as social hostilities. In 2016, however, Houthis formed their own government and had control of territory that is home to more than half of Yemen's population.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, researchers coded actions by Houthis in 2016 as government restrictions rather than social hostilities and continued to do so in 2023.

### **Coding by nationality or ethnicity**

We do not code incidents either as social hostilities involving religion or as government restrictions on religion based solely on the nationality or ethnicity of the people involved in those incidents. For an incident to be counted on either the SHI or GRI, the sources used in this study must indicate either that (a) religion was a factor in the motivation of the individuals or groups that committed the actions in question or (b) that the target of the actions clearly was religious or connected to religion.

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<sup>20</sup> Nov. 28, 2016. "[Yemen: Houthi rebels form new government](#)." Al Jazeera.

## Displacement coding

Starting with data covering 2016, researchers changed the way they coded displacement caused by religion-related conflict or terrorism. Previously, researchers would record displacement figures that were reported in any sources. During the coding period covering 2015, researchers continued to code displacement figures in this way but also recorded displacement figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), in order to compare the results. Researchers found that the figures from the UNHCR and IDMC more closely matched UN estimates for new displacements in the calendar year than did the previous method of capturing displacements, which tended to overestimate the number of new displacements in a coding year because the figures often included the *total* number of displaced people from a country and not necessarily the *newly* displaced. Therefore, beginning with the data covering 2016, researchers exclusively used UNHCR and IDMC figures to more conservatively estimate the number of new displacements in the coding year. Displacement was only coded in countries with active religion-related conflict or terrorism in order to avoid including displacements from other types of conflicts or terrorism.

## Country constitution audit

Researchers conducted an audit of country constitutions for coding covering the years 2007-2014. While the vast majority of country constitutions were correctly coded as to whether they included religious freedom provisions, there were a few countries where the coding was amended. These included Mexico, Costa Rica, Fiji, Iran, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Cameroon, Kenya and Mozambique. These amendments resulted in minimal changes in these countries' overall GRI scores and did not alter overall trends represented in previous reports. Two countries – Mexico and Costa Rica – had score changes that pushed them from one category to another in 2014. Mexico's 2014 GRI score decreased from "high" to "moderate," while Costa Rica's 2014 GRI score increased from "low" to "moderate."

## Potential biases

As noted earlier, the primary and secondary sources indicate that the North Korean government is among the most repressive in the world, including toward religion. But because independent observers lack regular access to North Korea, the sources are unable to provide the kind of specific, timely information that forms the basis of this report. Therefore, North Korea is not included on either index.

This raises two important issues concerning potential information bias in the sources. The first is whether other countries that limit outsiders' access and that may seek to obscure or distort their

record on religious restrictions were adequately covered by the sources. Countries with relatively limited access have multiple primary and secondary sources of information that Pew Research Center used for its coding.

Each is also covered by other secondary quantitative datasets on religious restrictions that have used a similar coding scheme, including earlier years of coded U.S. State Department report data produced by Brian J. Grim at Penn State University's Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) project (four datasets); independent coding by experts at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Liberty using indexes also available from ARDA (one dataset); and content analysis of country constitutions conducted by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty (one dataset). Pew Research Center staff used these for cross-validation. Thus, contrary to what one might expect, even most countries that limit access to information tend to receive fairly extensive coverage by groups that monitor religious restrictions.

The second key question – the flipside of the first – is whether countries that provide freer access to information receive worse scores simply because more information is available on them. As described more fully in the [Methodology in the baseline report](#), Pew Research Center staff compared the length of U.S. State Department reports on freer-access countries with those of less-free-access countries. The comparison found that the median number of words was approximately three times as large for the limited-access countries as for the open-access countries. This suggests that problems in freer-access countries are generally not overreported in the U.S. State Department's reports.

Only when it comes to religion-related violence and intimidation in society do the sources report more problems in the freer-access countries than in the limited-access ones. However, the Social Hostilities Index includes several measures – such as SHI Q.8 (“Did religious groups themselves attempt to prevent other religious groups from being able to operate?”) and SHI Q.11 (“Were women harassed for violating religious dress codes?”) – that are less susceptible to such reporting bias because they capture general social trends or attitudes as well as specific incidents. With these limitations in mind, it appears that the coded information on social hostilities is a fair gauge of the situation in the vast majority of countries and a valuable complement to the information on government restrictions.

Data on social impediments to religious practice can more confidently be used to make comparisons among countries with sufficient openness, which includes more than nine-in-ten countries covered in the coding.

An analysis by Grim and Richard Wike, Pew Research Center’s director of global attitudes research, tested the reliability of the U.S. State Department’s reports on social impediments to religious practice by comparing public opinion data with data coded from the reports in previous years by Grim and experts at Penn State University. They concluded that “the understanding of social religious intolerance embodied in the U.S. State Department’s reports is comparable with the results of population surveys and individual expert opinion.”<sup>21</sup>

## Coding harassment of specific religious groups

As in previous reports, this study provides a summary of the number of countries where specific religious groups faced government or social harassment. This is essentially a cross-tabulation of GRI.Q.11 (“Was there harassment or intimidation of religious groups by any level of government?”) and the first type of religious hatred or bias measured in SHI.Q.1.a (“Did individuals face harassment or intimidation motivated by religious hatred or bias?”). For the purposes of this study, the definition of harassment includes any mention in the primary and secondary sources of an offense against an individual or group based on religious identity. Such offenses may range from physical attacks and direct coercion to more subtle forms of discrimination. But prejudicial opinions or attitudes, in and of themselves, do not constitute harassment unless they are acted upon in a palpable way.

As noted above, this study provides data on the number of countries in which different religious groups are harassed or intimidated. But the study does *not* assess either the severity or the frequency of the harassment in each country. Therefore, the results should not be interpreted as gauging which religious group faces the most harassment or persecution around the world.

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<sup>21</sup> Refer to Grim, Brian J., and Richard Wike. 2010. “[Cross-Validating Measures of Global Religious Intolerance: Comparing Coded State Department Reports with Survey Data and Expert Opinion.](#)” Politics and Religion.